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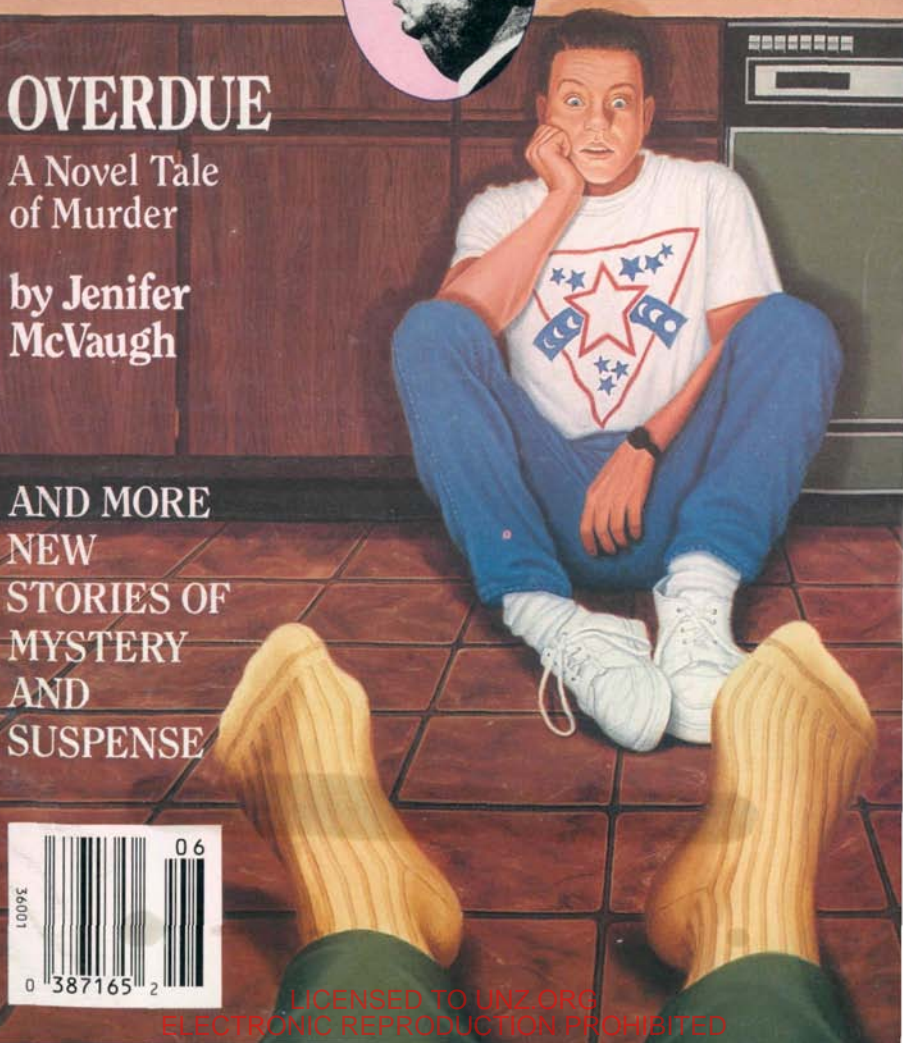


OVERDUE

A Novel Tale
of Murder

by Jenifer
McVaugh

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

We have three new authors to welcome in this issue, two of them presenting here their first stories. And, as it happens, they come from all over.

Jenifer McVaugh, author of our cover story "Overdue," hails from Ann Arbor (a lot of our authors call Michigan home, it seems) but presently lives in Ontario. She's a former journalist for a newspaper and a present freelancer. "Overdue" is her first published story.

Martin Limon, author of "A Coffin of Rice," is a San Franciscan, also a journalist, also publishing his first story in these pages. He's a sergeant first class in the U.S. Army who began writing for the Korea News Bureau of the *Pacific Stars and Stripes* in 1968 at the age of nineteen. Since then, he's spent eleven years in the Ori-

ent, has studied Mandarin Chinese and Korean, and says, "In all my travels it has been the GI's and the amazingly resilient Oriental people who have provided me with my well-spring of inspiration." "A Coffin of Rice" is set in ancient Korea.

Jerry Skarky, author of "Willie's Story," lives in Oklahoma. A former writer who has spent a number of years doing other things, he's back to writing full time again. "Willie's Story" seems to us a particularly strong one; we're glad for his return!

Finally, we want to make special note of Joseph Payne Brennan's "Junk." Longtime readers of AHMM will remember Mr. Brennan's other stories for us from the sixties and seventies. His last one appeared in January, 1976 ("Long Hollow Swamp").

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Holly Wallinger**, Managing Editor; **Judy Downer**, Assistant Editor; **Terri Czczko**, Art Director; **Ron Kuliner**, Associate Art Director; **Nancy Siwinski**, Junior Designer; **Carole Dixon**, Production Director; **Cynthia Manson**, Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Florence Eichin**, Manager, Contracts and Permissions; **Elizabeth Beatty**, Circulation Director; **Brian McKeon**, Corporate Business Manager; **Christian Dorbandt**, Newsstand Marketing and Promotion Manager; **Dennis Jones**, Newsstand Operations Manager; **Veena Raghavan**, Director, Special Projects; **Irene Bozoki**, Classified Advertising Director; **A. Bruce Chatterton**, Advertising Director; **Lisa Feerick**, Advertising Services Manager.

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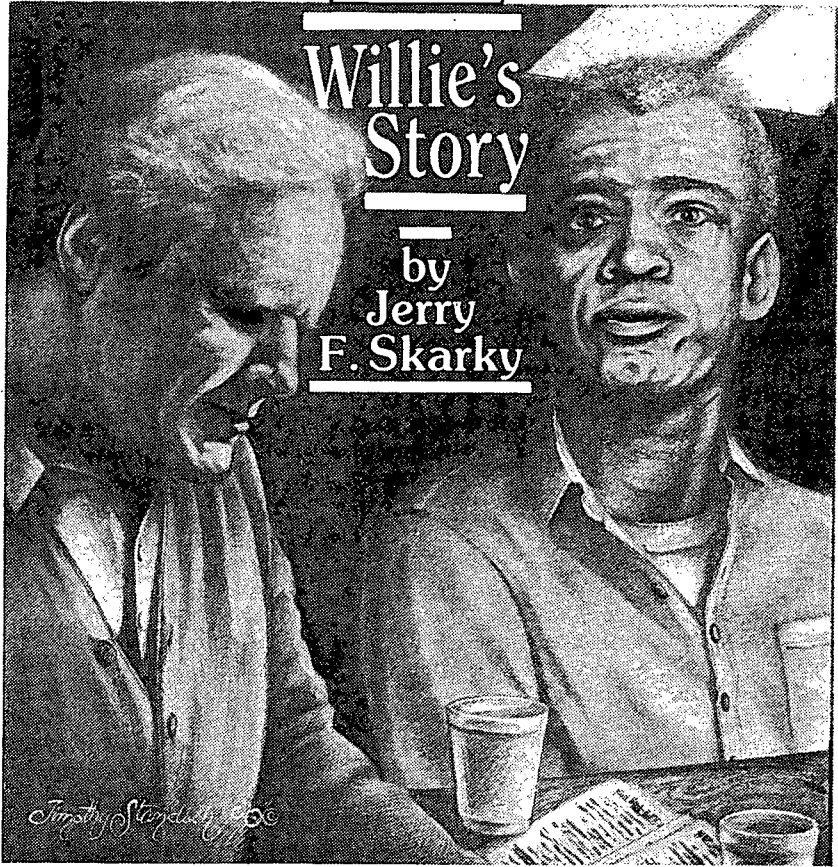
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FICTION

Willie's Story

by
Jerry
F. Skarky



It was Sunday morning, Willie's morning to collect cans. He knew which bars and parking lots were worth the gas to drive to, and in The Ville he knew the lots where the kids hung out, even the stretches of bar ditch that were worth the walk and the bend and stoop.

He was still agile for his age, and the early Sunday stillness stirred a nostalgic reverence in

his soul. He didn't smash the cans; he didn't like the noise. But the muted clink of the cans in the trash bag his failing ears did enjoy, like distant chimes or tolling bells.

His last stop every Sunday was a bridge over a drainage ditch out on the blacktop half a mile past the city limit sign. Willie had deduced that those kids driving around partying

Illustration by Timothy Standish

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on the country roads would dump their empties on the way back, and the ditch was usually good for at least a couple of empty six-packs. And after the hard rain Wednesday of the previous week, no telling what had caught in the culvert's mouth.

Willie parked his old station wagon past the bridge and walked back, picking up the bad tosses on the way. Weeds had shot up waist high under the bridge, and the high water had matted them with debris, dead vegetation, paper trash, fragments of plastic, oil cans.

Willie looked down at the ditch's upper channel still treacherous with mud. A bright red car whizzed by, a church-dressed white family staring with cranky, fleeting eyes that Willie felt from the back of his head appraising him, categorizing him, dismissing him. A poor old black man collecting cans.

A smile crawled slowly over his face as he peered down, looking for the telltale glint or, better yet, the full brown sack riding the weeds.

He shifted his weight, and sun on aluminum caught his eye from directly below. The sun was high enough now to dazzle. His head moved a fraction reacting to the glare, his eyes squinted, focused on the bottom end of a Silver Bullet. At first he thought the can was

partly buried in mud, rich chocolate mud that slowly, numbly took form and made his heart slap in his chest. Not mud; a leg camouflaged in detritus, a human leg, a brown leg, a girl's brown human leg. And the other leg, disappearing with the rest of her under water-bent weeds.

Still. The legs were still.

As he walked kneeless to his car, and again several minutes later as the car lurched urgently through ascending gears, Willie told himself he had never seen anything as still as those young legs.

“A nd you last saw Sabrina Thursday evening about nine, you say?”

“No, man, I told you, Wednesday, man.”

An hour before it had been “sir”; the boy was getting tired. His lanky frame had slid down in the chair to an angle that couldn't be comfortable. The expressive eyes had lost the glaze of grief and fear.

Detective Lewis Allan made a second check beside the question on his notepad and without moving his head looked again at the loose shirt the boy was wearing, yellow with red and lavender diagonal bars. The shirt irritated him.

“Did you get along with her grandmother, Lenard?” The

murdered girl had been left by her mother as an infant. The mother's present whereabouts, unknown. Father, unknown.

The face above the shirt had assumed an air of punk toughness. Without looking at Allan the boy shrugged.

Time to try a little shock therapy.

"Lenard, this is your girlfriend we're talking about. A knife was stuck in her. Not just once, Lenard. Not in her heart, not in her stomach. In a place where some girls her age haven't even been touched." Allan paused to smile at the boy, knowing exactly how chilling the smile would be.

"Somebody was mad at her, Lenard, or crazy. Women sometimes do things to make a man crazy, don't they, Lenard?"

The boy's face had fallen apart feature by feature. Allan rocked gently in his chair and drummed his pen on the edge of his desk. The slow tap of the pen was the only sound in the room.

"What did you do with the knife, son?" Allan asked.

Lenard tried to sit up, but his feet slipped on the tile floor. His eyes bulged desperately, then his hips bucked again as he dug into his pocket.

"Here's my knife, man, you check it out." He started to toss the closed knife, thought better of it, and handed the knife across the desk.

The boy watched with burning eyes while Allan looked at the cheap, cracked plastic on the handle and opened first one, then the other small blades. One of the thumb-grooves was packed with gummy dirt, and Allan cleaned it out with his thumbnail before closing the blades and handing the knife back.

The blade that had mutilated the girl was eight to ten inches long, approximately an inch and a quarter wide. A tiny steel sliver had been found in her pelvic bone, so the knife they were looking for was a butcher knife with a nick in it.

"My granddaddy gave it to me when I was a kid," the boy said, stuffing his knife into a tight pocket.

"Used to have one about like it," Allan said absently. He was telling himself that he still had to treat the boy as a suspect, and his gut wasn't buying it. He made himself look one more time at the boy, at all the emotion wrestling naked under the smooth dark skin.

He sighed, rubbed his face. "I'm sorry, Lenard," he said, including everything in the apology, the girl's death, the interrogation, life itself.

The boy's face registered mistrust. Allan stared at the plaster unicorn on his desk, proudly painted and presented to him by his niece, age nine.

"See, Lenard," he said finally. "It would be a lot easier if you had done it. The boyfriend or the husband is always suspect number one."

The boy licked his lower lip uneasily and nodded.

"Did she tell you she was three months pregnant, Lenard?"

Lenard's head jerked up. He swallowed, his eyes began to fill and he looked down.

"She didn't tell you?"

"No," Lenard said, a sob.

"It was yours?"

The boy lifted his eyebrows, opened his mouth, then nodded.

"I'm sorry, Lenard," Allan said again.

Detective Donahoe elbowed through the door, a cigarette hanging from his mouth, a canned Coke in one hand, a Styrofoam coffee cup in the other. He nudged Lenard's shoulder to get him to notice the Coke. His eyes squinted a question through the cigarette smoke as he handed Allan the coffee.

Allan answered by rubbing his eyes.

Donahoe stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on Allan's desk. He lowered his bulk in the room's other chair, crossed his ankles, and folded his arms self-consciously over his belly.

Allan sipped at his coffee. Donahoe had forgotten the cream and sugar. He was about

to tell Donahoe to give the boy a ride home when Lenard spoke, his voice thick but under control: "I guess that's why she was going to New Orleans. Have that baby. Sabrina, she private about things like that. Old fashioned like. Most girls, they always bitchin' about periods—"

"When did she tell you this?" Allan asked, writing in his notebook.

"Wednesday night. She waited around like I should talk her out of it. Said she was gonna get a job in New Orleans. I thought she was, you know, jerkin' with me. There's this other chick I been out with, and I thought she . . . I didn't know about the baby. It was just a thing, man, I mean, no promises. . . ."

"Why New Orleans?"

"I don't know. Her grandma used to live there, I think."

"Did she say how she planned to get there?"

The boy sniffed, wiped his nose with his hand. "Bus."

"Did she have the money?"

The boy sniffed again and nodded. Allan offered him a box of tissues. Lenard took one and blew his nose.

"Where'd she get it?"

"She babysit, sometimes she get paid for it. Willie, he pay her to clean his house and feed his rabbits sometimes."

Allan stopped in the middle of a sip. "Willie who?"

"Old Willie Dixon. You know, he found her."

Donahoe and Allan exchanged a look, and Donahoe stood and left the room without saying anything. Allan flipped back a few pages in his notebook. *W.D. said he had seen the girl, didn't know her name.*

"So she knew Willie?" he asked the boy.

"Yeah. Her grandma didn't want her over there, though. She didn't like Willie, I never knew why. Everybody likes Willie. He's always helping kids when they, you know, get in like a hassle. Give people a place to stay. Willie, one time he lent me money for a battery for my car, said he got tired of having to jump me with the cables all the time. I mean, he treated Sabrina good, he ain't a dirty old man or nothing. Sabrina, she called him Uncle Wiggy. He was like a granddaddy to her, you know?"

Uncle Wiggy. Allan held his coffee and rocked thoughtfully.

The cup was empty when Donahoe came back in.

"I sent a couple of uniforms out to pick him up. What do you think, professor?"

Allan had taught sociology for a couple of years while working on a doctorate in criminology. It didn't matter that he had never finished his thesis, that he had moved back to the

small-town life of Martin City when his marriage broke up. To the other cops he was "professor," and he would always be "professor," to them a title bestowed partly to honor, however jokingly, to him a reminder of work left unfinished in his life, unfinished and therefore tinged with failure.

He dented the rim of the cup with his thumbnail.

"Well, I ran him," Donahoe said. "Nothing current. A few public drunks, a dropped assault, a DUI that dropped his license for a year." He shrugged. "The assault was kinda interesting. He popped a forty-year-old black male up side the head with the butt of a sawed-off shotgun. Legal length on the gun, it wasn't loaded. Refused to make a statement. Martinez wrote in the report that the younger dude said he didn't know the bitch was a friend of Willie's—that's a quote—and if Willie wouldn't come after him again he wouldn't press charges. This was last summer, by the way, and Willie was only seventy-four."

"Anything else?"

"Carmella in the office, when I gave her the name, said that Willie was the best old soul in town and I shouldn't be picking on that old man. That's a quote."

"It's Sunday, you don't have to quote." Allan finished circling the rim of the cup with

thumbnail creases and set it on his desk.

"Yeah, Larry and I were going fishing. Ten more minutes and you'd never a got me."

Allan looked at his watch: ten after six.

"We still have time for a Sunday drive."

The smile wavered on Donahoe's face. "The uniforms—"

"Let's go to Grandma's house," Allan said, headed for the door.

He wasn't sure, but behind him he thought he heard a moan.

The small house was sided with grey shingles which had darkened at the bottom. Otherwise it was notable mostly in that it sat farther from the street than the other houses on the block. There was no sidewalk, and the sandy path to the front door had been worn down below the grass on either side. The grass had just been cut, and the smell hung sweet and heavy in the warm air. Willie Dixon was loading a dirty red lawnmower in the old Datsun station wagon parked in front.

Donahoe's hand reached inside his jacket as the car settled to a stop. Allan touched his elbow.

"That's a lawnmower, not a machine gun. He mowed the old woman's lawn."

Allan stepped out of the car

while Donahoe pondered the implications. Willie slammed the car door and watched him approach with eyes swollen into glistening slits.

"You do good work, Willie."

"Suh," Willie said. His forehead creased and one puffy eye bulged open. A hand lifted slowly to tug his ear. "I wasn't sure, you un'stand. She shouldn't have been the girl I knew. No, suh, not like that."

"How's the girl's grandmother taking it?"

"She'll open the door to you, suh, I believe." He shook his head and his smile was painful. "But not to me."

The old man seemed to bend and age as Allan watched; tears glittered and filled and overflowed, and he took a wavering step back against the car. But he smiled and shook his head when Allan took a step forward to steady him. With gnarled dark fingers he tapped his chest.

"The pump," he said. "He pumps hard, but he don't do me no good."

"Can you drive, Willie?"

"Oh, sure. I sit down I be all right."

"We're gonna need your help, so I want you to go home and get some rest, okay?"

Allan felt those eyes studying his face while he wrote on one of his cards, using the car roof as a desk.

"There's probably a couple of

officers waiting for you at home, so I want you to give this to them, all right? Will you come to my office in the morning, and get some rest tonight?"

Willie took the card and squinted at it.

"You want me now, I go."

Allan smiled at him and found himself patting his shoulder.

"Tomorrow, Willie."

They smiled at each other for a moment before Willie turned toward the front of the car.

"Whatever I can do," he said over his shoulder. "You know that."

Donahoe had been waiting with folded arms beside the car. He joined Allan as he strolled down the path, apparently deep in thought.

"No physical evidence and you treat our two best suspects like some kind of royalty," he said, his tone lighter than the words.

"Uh-huh," Allan said.

The front door had been opened since their arrival. Through the wooden screen door Allan could hear Mike Wallace on *Sixty Minutes*. He knocked twice. Mike Wallace faded, and after a few seconds Sabrina's grandmother, Miss Carrie Webster, appeared at the door.

"Hello, ma'am," Allan said, not smiling. "Very sorry to bother you. We have a few questions."

The old woman peered at

them each in turn through black-framed glasses with bottom rims that curved to a point at the corners. She unlatched the door and stepped back, jerking her left leg awkwardly.

The credits for *Sixty Minutes* were running soundlessly on the old black and white portable sitting atop an even older round-tubed console. The divan and two overstuffed chairs were covered with worn bedspreads. The walls were nearly covered with photographs, most unframed, many of the murdered girl, some much older, formal portraits of somber faces. Large color renditions of Jesus dominated two walls.

They stood in the center of the dim room while the old woman moved stiffly around them and sat heavily in a straight-backed rocker, her wide hips bulging over the seat.

"You all may be seated," she said.

The worn carpet gave strangely under his feet, and he realized as he sat down on the sofa that there were two layers of carpet, one over the other. On the coffee table lay a worn leather-bound Bible, its pages thickened at the upper corner from years of thumbing.

Allan looked over the room, intimidated in a way that the homes of the rich had never intimidated him. It was hard for him to imagine a young girl

growing up here, but already her death darkened this house, had settled in with a permanence, as if her life and youth and energy had been no more than a temporary interruption. He was ready to leave; if he had been alone, perhaps he would have mumbled an excuse and left.

Donahoe was staring at him.

"Mrs. Webster, when was the last time you saw your granddaughter?"

She looked at the silent television as she answered, her eyes unblinking. "Wednesday."

"She didn't come home Wednesday night?"

The rocking chair began to move an inch or two back and forth. "No."

"Was it unusual for her to stay out all night?"

The old woman's lip trembled. "She was out late nearly every night. I'm an old woman, I can only tell her how to be. I tell her what the Good Book say, and she smile and do what she want."

"But it was unusual she didn't come home?"

"Twice before she gone two nights. An old woman can only worry, and pray."

"Do you know where she was on those occasions, ma'am?"

"She with that boy."

"Lenard?"

Her eyes still on the television, she stopped rocking. "I

told her about the wrath of God, I spoke to her of the fires of Hell."

She turned to Allan with eyes filled with some of that fire. She began to rock again, her nostrils flaring, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"God's will be done," she said softly, her eyes softening and turning inward.

Allan took a deep breath and let it out. Donahoe pressed his thumbs together across his belly.

"This is difficult, I'm sorry, but were you aware the girl was . . . in a family way?"

The old woman's eyes squeezed shut and her lips began to move in mumbled prayer.

"I appreciate how painful this is, ma'am. Just one thing more for now. Were you aware that Sabrina did part-time work for Willie Dixon?"

The chair jerked forward as the old woman leaned over it. "That name has been forbidden in this house for more than forty years. You tell me that my flesh and blood took money from that man? No, I will not hear it. I will not hear it."

Later, in the car after they had calmed down the old woman and made their exit, Donahoe told Allan, "If I was that poor girl, I think I'd of got myself pregnant sooner."

Allan had his note pad out and was writing 40 yrs ASK
WILLIE.

When he was finished he reached over and patted Donahoe's belly.

"I think you timed it about right."

"Coffee, Willie?"
"No, suh, thank you, I had my cup."

Allan was working on his third. It had been one of those nights when the emptiness of his bed had itched against his skin, and sleep had come and gone more than once, leaving prickling after-images and half-memories. Willie looked energized and eager.

"The uniformed officers give you any trouble last night?" he asked the old man.

"No, suh. They was there like you say, and I show them that card, and whoo, they was none too happy, but they leave me be."

Allan picked up a pencil and laced it between his fingers.

"Willie, who do you think killed Sabrina?"

Willie's eyes twitched and refocused on Allan's tie. He spoke slowly, considering every word: "A man can think any thing he wants, suh. Any thing. It don't make it so. But when he goes to open his mouth—now you hear me good. When he goes to open his mouth, he better know what he say be true."

"I hear you, Willie." Allan

sighed and drummed his desk. "What if I wasn't a cop?"

Willie smiled. "Then you wouldn't be talking to me now."

Allan laughed. He pushed back his chair and crossed his feet on the corner of his desk.

"How do you want to help me, Willie? You tell me how you want to do it."

"How 'bout I tell you a story," Willie said, leaning forward, elbows on knees, his smile sly and sad.

"A true story?"

"Oh, yessuh, it true. This story I know is true."

His eyebrows raised, Allan nodded.

Willie leaned back and settled himself in the chair.

"Long time ago. Down south. The city of New Orleans, Louisiana. There was this young man, done been in the war and got himself shot up and they send him home, you un'stand. Now you hear me good.

"This young man, he was crazy for some time. The war done that to him, you un'stand? For some time now, he didn't care he was alive or he was dead, and he took to drinking wine, he drinking wine on the streets, you un'stand? He almost died, woulda died too, this woman hadn't took him in." He lapsed for a moment, his eyes distant. Allan waited till he roused himself.

"A fine woman. She didn't

have to do that, take in no sick man off the street, feed him and nurse with him until he well enough and go out and get drunk again. Then she take him in again. She didn't have to do that, no, suh. And the man, he can't understand it. She don't want him as a woman wants a man, no way. Why she do it? And he puzzled on it. Then one day when he stone cold sober it came to him, that she not doing it for him, she doing it for Jesus. You hear what I'm saying?"

Outrage had crept into Willie's voice, and Allan nodded uncomfortably, staring at the reminder in his notebook, 40 yrs ASK WILLIE. He reached for his pen and drew a line through it.

"She do it for Jesus," Willie said, shaking his head. "And what do he do when he figure it out? That's right, he go get drunk, he steal some of her money and he buy a bottle of that cheap wine and he get drunk. But this time he mad drunk, he mean drunk, un'stand? So when he come back home, she there and he drunk . . . he did what he did, he lay with her, you hear what I'm saying to you? All the time she praying . . ."

Tears glittered in Willie's eyes and he sighed and sniffed before he went on.

"He a crazy man then, but

when he wake up he know what to do. He try to make it right by her, you un'stand? But she, the woman, it like she take over being crazy from him, you un'stand? She won't talk about it, she begins her praying again, right while he be speaking to her, she be praying. She didn't do nothing but pray, for a while, and for that while he was taking care of her, you un'stand . . ."

Willie's voice had dropped low, and Allan's mind had jumped ahead, trying to fit it all together. Then Willie stopped talking and stared at him, his eyes haunted.

"She was pregnant, wasn't she?" Allan said softly.

Willie's eyes jumped with surprise, but he nodded slowly.

"She was that," he said.

"That's where the story really begins, doesn't it," Allan said.

"Who's to say, suh. Who's to say."

Allan opened the bottom right drawer of his desk and brought out the nearly-full pint of Wild Turkey. It had been there for six months, a Christmas present from the chief, who hadn't bothered to find out that Allan drank scotch on those rare occasions when he drank at all.

Allan pulled two Styrofoam cups from the stack he kept in the same drawer. He set the cups down and began to pour.

The liquor sloshed the light

cup almost off the desk, but before he could grab it, Willie's hand was there to steady it, his quickness astonishing. When the liquor was poured Willie took his hand off the cup and let Allan present it to him. Allan returned the bottle to the drawer.

"That's coffee if anybody asks," he said.

"Mighty fine brew it is, too," Willie answered by way of a toast, raising his cup. He took a good swallow and smacked his lips, beaming.

Allan let him take another sip before prompting. "So she was pregnant. What did you do?"

Willie shook his head, smiling. "I tell you a story. I may be somebody in that story, I may not be, you un'stand."

He twisted sideways in the chair and leaned forward, holding the cup carefully. "Now listen to me good. A man's past is history, a woman's past is hers alone. Do you hear what I'm saying to you?"

"Even when there's a murder involved?"

Willie shrugged, tapped his chest. "I tell you about me, what I believe, what way I live. Not always, but what way I live life now."

Allan nodded and saluted Willie with his cup. "It's your story, Willie. Tell it."

Nodding, Willie cleared his

throat, his eyebrows drawing together in thought.

"I got a job," he said. His eyes lifted sheepishly to look at Allan. When Allan didn't react he took a quick sip.

"He got a job. Working in a kitchen. He didn't go getting drunk so much, 'cept maybe on payday, you un'stand? He stay home, he take care of the woman, he work, and she sit around and get big with the baby and she pray all the time. He owe the woman, you un'stand.

"And she has that baby. Prettiest little girl-baby you ever saw. Maybe he didn't love that woman, but he love that baby. And she take good care of that baby. He thought she was getting well." He took a sip from his cup and made a face that had nothing to do with the whisky.

"Then one day he come home and the woman and the baby, they gone. The money, they had a little money, it was gone. That little baby, she was just a month old, that woman done take her and run off. Yes," he said, drawing it into a hiss extinguished by a slow sip from the cup. In his eyes Allan saw the man who had wielded the shotgun.

"You know the man have to find that woman. The baby. He have to see the baby all right, you un'stand? And he did. The

woman, she have a sister up north. That's where she was, yes, and he follow her and he find her."

"In Martin City."

The old man stared at him without appearing to hear. "That woman, she won't let him have a thing to do with her, not one thing. The sister, maybe she understand. He get a job and he give the sister money. For the baby. And he gamble, the man do that. He drink some too, but he don't drink as much when he gamble as he let on, you see what I'm saying, and he don't lose too much.

"He did himself all right, yes he did. And he did as right by the girl as he could while she growing up. You know he do that. Even when he have children by other women, he did that."

Donahoe opened the door and Allan kept him there with a look.

"You fellas need anything?" he asked around the door. "Coffee?"

Willie grinned and held up his cup. "Mr. Allan here, he done get me some coffee."

Donahoe smiled back and disappeared behind the closing door.

"He your partner, like on TV?" Willie asked.

"Yep. Andy and Barney."

Willie laughed, his eyes showing the whisky. Allan

wondered if he had been too generous with it. He resisted the urge to prod the old man, sensing that Willie was feeling his way through the painful history, balanced on the invisible like a blind man on a tight-rope. Willie was staring at him, studying, wondering.

"Mr. Allan, I got to ask you something now, and I don't want to get you mad or anything. You un'stand? I mean, now, I know you a policeman, and that's fine. But can you not be a policeman for a few minutes? Can you just be a man listen to another man, hear a man what he say? Can you do that? Then you can be a policeman again all you want?"

"Willie, as far as I'm concerned, you haven't said anything on the record yet."

"Uh-huh, that's good. I tell you some things now a policeman, he might not understand, but the man would, you hear what I'm saying."

"Yeah," Allan said, realizing that the bottom showed through the liquor in his own cup, which explained that soaring sensation. "Remind me to get drunk with you sometime, Willie."

"You bet," Willie said, his head tilted thoughtfully. "I hate to tell you this next thing, but the man in the story—you know who—he's not around no more. You listen to me good. He die in the doing. He the memory of

a man somebody used to be."

Allan closed one eye, nodded once, opened the eye. Patience, he told himself.

"When the girl grew up, she weren't real pretty," Willie went on as though the story had never been interrupted. "And she went long time without a man. Her daddy got to know her some, not as her daddy, as a friend. Someone to listen where her mamma's too busy praying to listen. Then when she did get a man, he were no good. Bad, bad man. And she let him do what he want, she afraid she lose him, you hear how it was?"

"Then one day he do her real wrong. He beat on her, tore her up, bad. And she come to me. Not the first time, but this was worst. She never talk right again, you un'stand. So I—her daddy, her daddy, he go find that man, he was a big mean man, and there weren't nothing else to be done or said by then, so that man died. You hear me good now. Right or wrong, that man never beat no woman again."

Willie sighed, drained his cup, leaned forward to place it on the desk.

"The girl never told she was pregnant. Never said. The thing he handled different if she say. She maybe didn't know. But without no man she went back to her mamma, and her mamma —" He shook his head and

pushed the air with his hand.

"Her mamma's sister say that crazy woman, she preach that poor girl to death. I don't know what the truth be, really. The sister, she say first the girl die giving birth to the child, but why they tell everybody else the girl go and run off? Then the sister, she wasn't right after that. She wouldn't take no money for the baby, she act scared all the time." He tapped his skull. "Her mind start to go. The sister. She walk down the street laughing and talking and she be alone. She pretend to me, me who know, that the girl didn't die she run away. She see me again, she scream, she jump up and down and she run away."

"Then they find her dead one day, froze to death, no coat on. I ask myself, why her mind go? I ask myself, what did happen to the girl? I ask myself, how crazy is that woman? You hear what I'm sayin'?"

Allan took a deep breath and ran both hands through his hair, letting it stay where it stood.

"I hear you, Willie. Number one, we got no proof. Number two, I don't quite understand why you decided to tell me all this. No offense, Willie, I just don't think you've ever given a cop anything but a bunch of jive in your life."

Willie threw his head back laughing and slapped his leg.

"Number two, you too right," he said. "I never did. But I getting old, Mr. Allan. The man I tell you about, he deal with things in a different way. I couldn't do that. I not that man any more, I tell you that. A man has to learn as he gets along, Mr. Allan."

"I understand, Willie."

"Yessuh, that's fine. But number one. Big number one. I think I have a way to get you that evidence."

Allan leaned forward in his chair. What the hell, he thought, and opened the bottom right drawer.

By the middle of the afternoon, the effects of the whisky had worn off and Allan was cranky. Willie's plan, which that morning had seemed both appropriate and daring, looked more cop-show melodramatic by the minute. Nothing had gone right.

He had explained the plan to the captain, who had sniffed skeptically at his mint-scented breath and asked questions that had nothing to do with anything. But Allan had been glib and eloquent, or so it seemed at the time, and the captain reluctantly gave permission, though he dug out a release form he insisted Willie sign first.

Then Allan's request for the necessary equipment had been

put on hold. The equipment had been checked out for an undercover drug job, and although a murder investigation should have priority, shoulders had been shrugged.

Even Donahoe had suggested maybe he should sleep on it first. How could that old woman dump the body, professor? Does she own a car? Can she even drive?

Then check on it, Allan had ordered.

Donahoe's face had been carefully neutral when he reported back that Miss Carrie Webster did have a current license and owned a 1971 Mercury Comet.

"Would you like me to find out if she has a membership at a fitness center?" he had asked.

"I'd rather have a search warrant on the car," Allan had answered, his tone conciliatory.

"Professor, listen, has it occurred to you maybe the old dude's handing you a load?"

"Has it occurred to you maybe he isn't?"

Donahoe had sighed wearily and sat down, and that was where they were now, Allan waiting for his wounded brain capillaries to heal, Donahoe agonizing.

"Maybe if Willie signed a statement—"

"No," Allan said.

Donahoe sighed and massaged both his chins. "Then we

just don't have anything to justify a search warrant."

"Not yet," Allan admitted. "Let's go talk to Willie."

Pain stabbed his temples when he stood.

Willie's station wagon was parked next to a husky mulberry tree that threatened the porch of the small frame house on the large corner lot. The neighborhood was predominantly white working class, and Allan wondered what the neighbors thought of the scruffy chickens inside the sagging wire fence.

Willie answered the door shirtless and puffy-eyed but cordial. Inside they found the same sort of furnishings as in Miss Webster's house, down to the televisions stacked one on the other. The house was bachelor neat; grimy handprints on the white woodwork but the ashtrays clean, no litter.

As opposed to Miss Webster's, the house had a bright, comfortable feel to it. When Willie excused himself to put on a shirt, Allan and Donahoe sat on the couch and Donahoe lit a cigarette.

"You see the muscle tone on that old boy?" he asked Allan. "Now there's somebody who could heft a body around."

Allan was afraid Willie would come back carrying a bottle, but he didn't.

"You gentlemen care for some iced tea maybe?" he asked instead.

Allan shook his head. "We've run into some problems, Willie."

Willie's face registered concern. He sat and leaned forward in the bedspread-covered chair, cocking an ear.

"The equipment we need isn't available right now. Be a few days."

Willie looked back and forth between them as if he wasn't sure what this meant. Before Allan could explain further, Donahoe cleared his throat and spoke, his tone official.

"Sir, there's some questions I would like to ask you. First, what makes you think that an old woman like Miss Webster would have the strength to lift the dead weight of a body for the purpose of disposing of it?"

Willie looked at Allan with a hurt expression. Allan gave him an apologetic shrug and a quick wink.

Willie leaned back, fixing Donahoe with one eye. "Miss Carrie? Why, Miss Carrie, she was a butcher during the war. After the war some. She lift a quarter of beef like nothing to it. Miss Carrie, she was a strong woman."

"Then how," Donahoe asked, glancing at Allan, "did you manage to rape her?"

Willie's jaw jutted out. "Rape?"

Who say a thing like me raping the woman? Weren't no rape. I say I lay with her, I go into her bed drunk—now hear me good. A woman may not want a man, but she weak for the need of one, you hear what I'm saying? Mr. Allan, he understand."

Allan nodded at Willie and smiled at Donahoe, whose ears blushed a furious pink.

"Okay," Donahoe finally said.

Willie gave Allan his wink back.

"One thing bothers me, Willie," Allan said. "How do you plan on getting in to see her? If she won't let you in, it's down the tubes."

Willie's nostrils flared as he smiled. "She has to see me if I goes over to evict her."

"You own her house?"

"Oh, yessuh."

Allan began to chuckle, as much from the expression on Donahoe's face as anything.

"You own this house, too?" Donahoe asked, shellshocked.

"A few houses is on land I own," Willie said to Allan. "A business or two. I do all right, I tell you that."

"Does the Webster woman know you own her house?"

Willie's face clouded. "The sister tell her, she admit it to me. She knew she not supposed to, supposed to not say nothing. By then, Miss Carrie, she old, she have no other place to go, you un'stand. She had the

granddaughter she raising. I don't ask for nothing. I pays the taxes, she just stay there."

"I don't understand," Donahoe said, almost whining. "Why is a man with all this property out picking up cans?"

"Cans is forty-nine cents a pound," Willie said.

Allan bit his lip and looked away.

"The can money, that's the money I play with," Willie explained.

"Gamble with, you mean." Donahoe could be stubborn.

Willie grinned at him. Donahoe looked at Allan to make sure he wasn't laughing. Allan reached inside his jacket for the liability release and unfolded it.

"Willie, the captain gave me this release for you to sign. It says that if anything happens to you the department and the city won't be responsible. You'll be on your own. So if you're having second thoughts, now's the time to say so."

"And if I do?"

Allan shrugged. "We bring Carrie Webster in for questioning. I don't want to do that unless you do change your mind because we want her off guard when you go see her. But if we bring her in, we might get her to confess."

Willie snorted. "That woman? You don't get that woman confess nothing."

"That's why we're willing to go along with your idea. As soon as we get the equipment."

Willie nodded, his face drawn. Then his eyes lit up.

"We see what you think," he said.

He sprang to his feet and hurried to the back of the house. Donahoe scooted to the edge of the couch and checked his shoulder holster.

When Willie returned, he sauntered into the room, smiling innocently. He casually took the chair across the small room from the two detectives. Allan noticed the checkbook in his shirt pocket.

"Say something. Say some words," Willie said.

Allan raised his eyebrows at Donahoe and Donahoe growled, "You have the right to remain silent, you have the right—"

"That's good." Willie pulled the hidden object behind the checkbook from his shirt pocket and handed it to Allan. It was a microcassette recorder, the slimmest Allan had ever seen.

"Where did you get this?" Allan asked.

"Radio Shack," Willie said. "Cost nearly a hundred dollars."

Allan pushed the rewind button, stopped it, pushed play.

"—get this? Radio Shack. Cost nearly a hundred dollars."

Allan hit rewind again, this time held it longer.

"—ay something. Say some words." Then barely audible, "You have the right to remain silent . . ."

"Voice activated," Donahoe said.

"Willie, with our equipment, we can monitor you," Allan explained carefully. "We can hear everything going on so if you need help, we can be there. But with this—"

"I be on my own. Yessuh," Willie said. "Miss Carrie don't scare me."

"What're you doing with one of those things?" Donahoe wanted to know.

Willie smiled. "People, sometimes they say an old man forget, sometimes remember wrong. Specially when they money on the line. You hear what I'm saying? Somebody get away with that once, it's all right. After that, they get away with it again, everybody think Willie a fool? Huh-uh, no, suh."

Allan looked at Donahoe.

Donahoe blinked at him twice, then said, "Let's go for it."

Allan nodded. Willie reached for the tape recorder.

"I use this, I don't have to sign that thing you said."

Allan hesitated. "Willie, I—"

"You tell your captain I change my mind, you un'stand? I bring this to you when I'm done. This just be me and her. The way it began. Just me and her."

For a few seconds the white cop and the old black man stared at each other, neither smiling. Allan had a vague though strong urge to warn the old man, but he realized there was nothing he could say that the eyes staring at him didn't already understand. He stood, folded the release form, and nodded at the open-mouthed Donahoe.

Willie followed them to the door. On the porch Donahoe said over his shoulder, "Don't forget to rewind that tape. And check the batteries."

The following morning, before he played the tape that Willie had recorded the night before, Allan rewound it, removed it from the machine and examined it. The recording tabs were intact.

To prevent the tape's being recorded over, Allan carefully broke the tabs with a ballpoint. Then he initialed both sides and snapped it back into the recorder. Before he hit the play button, Donahoe burst through the door.

Donahoe's eyes bulged and he was out of breath. "I just heard," he said.

"Sit down and try to breathe through your nose," Allan said.

Donahoe gave him a perfunctory scowl and sat.

Allan waited while Donahoe took two deep breaths, then he pushed the play button.

"—ello, this is Willie. Sitting in the car in front of Miss Carrie's, making sure this thing works before I go to the door. Little light come on, guess it works."

A hollow bang. "Car door," Donahoe said.

The rattle of knuckles on a screen door. Repeated. Repeated again, louder.

"Miss Carrie, you come open this door." Willie's voice sounded shrill. "Miss Carrie. Miss Carrie, now, I own this house. You know I own this house. You don't want to see no sheriff come evict you, do you now, Miss Carrie?"

A muffled crackling. Donahoe leaned forward, his face strained.

"Miss Carrie," Willie said, a greeting, uncertain.

"Say what you come to say," a fainter voice said, surprisingly like Willie's but gruff, almost guttural.

"I'm free of drink this evening, Miss Carrie. Just a poor old man come to make peace."

"You'll have no peace in hell, Willie Dixon."

"Yes'm, I know that, surely do."

"What you say about the sheriff come evicting me?"

"Well, now, Miss Carrie, a man gets to thinking about when he won't be around no more, what things be like then. I been maybe thinking I should

deed you the house now, Miss Carrie. You won't talk to me, how I gonna do that, you un'stand?"

After a few seconds an inaudible murmur. Allan quickly stopped the tape, touched rewind, increased the volume.

"Lord, lord, lord," Miss Carrie murmured.

"Old man gets to thinking, Miss Carrie. His heart wake him up in the night, a man get scared, you un'stand, laying in the dark thinking on all his sins. So if you be so kind, like to help me get right with the Lord, maybe teach me the way of praying, an old man sure be grateful, Miss Carrie."

Donahoe grunted at Allan and wagged his head.

"Lord have mercy on your soul if you're trying some con on me, Willie Dixon."

"Yes, ma'am."

The scrape and bang of the door.

Willie's voice, clear and loud: "That picture, Miss Carrie. Sure bring back a memory of New Orleans."

"That city is owned by Lucifer himself, Mr. Dixon. Now, if you come here to find forgiveness in the Lord, let us kneel on the floor and pray."

They must have knelt close together, Allan thought when the prayer began, "Oh Lord Holy Jesus . . .," because the woman's voice boomed, fired by

evangelical fervor.

Punctuated by Willie's occasional "Amen, sister" or "Hallelujah," the prayer—more of a diatribe against Willie's long life as a sinner—settled into a rhythm and rolled on and on.

"Hope he didn't run out of tape," Donahoe said.

Allan scowled and ran the tape back to catch what he missed.

"—girl who died in the shame of youth, a sinner of the flesh—"

Allan settled back.

"—sweet Jesus, take that child to your heavenly bosom, forgive those sins of the flesh—"

"Forgive the poor soul, Lord, who took that child's life," Willie's voice interrupted.

"Amen," the woman's voice, trembling.

"And forgive her, Jesus, for doing it in Your Name, like she think she should do being Your servant, Lord."

"Am—"

The silence must have lasted more than a few seconds, for the recorder had shut off and switched back on to Willie's voice: "—orgive Miss Carrie, Lord," spoken gently but with urgency.

"You leave," Miss Carrie said, cold as steel.

"You did it trying to save us all, didn't you, Miss Carrie. You figure the Lord have mercy on a girl killed like that, girl who she didn't really do the wrong

herself, but have the sin passed on down to her, now ain't that right? You see that with her gone, there nothing left of our sin, either. 'Cause you killed her mamma, too, all that time ago. Now our sin all gone from the world, now ain't that right? Except for us. Except for you and me. And we be gone soon enough. You just cleaning up our mess, weren't you, Miss Carrie."

"It was your blood," Miss Carrie said calmly. "Tainted. The Lord knew. The Lord told me. He told me in my heart to kill you that night you lay sleeping. But I disobeyed the Lord—I took the laws of man above the Law of God. And I was the vessel passed on your evil blood. In my heart I knew."

"And Sabrina's mamma, yes, I prayed it ended there. My sister, she swore the Lord would cleanse the baby, not to harm that baby. Sabrina. Sabrina, that girl laughed in the Face of the Lord . . . like you, Willie Dixon. Just like you."

"So you cut her dead."

"I sent her purified to God."

"Why you not kill me?"

"Because I'm a fool."

"You're no fool, Miss Carrie."

Never was a fool."

Sobbing. It took Allan a moment to recognize the sound. Sobs ripping a woman's heart.

"Just you and me, Miss Carrie. Who's to know?"

The sobs lifted into a wail, a furious squeal, piercing, then fading like feedback from a speaker.

"Mr. Allan," Willie's whisper, stirring the hair on Allan's neck. "She gone to the kitchen. Now I don't want you to worry yourself about this none—now hear me good. Doc says nothing he can do, my pump gone bad, you un'stand? She coming. Lord forgive us, you forgive us too."

The bellow gaining from the background nearly drowned the last words.

"My God," Donahoe whispered.

Allan shut off the tape. Donahoe stared at him and closed his mouth and swallowed.

"I can see why that screaming brought the neighbors," Donahoe said. "Whew."

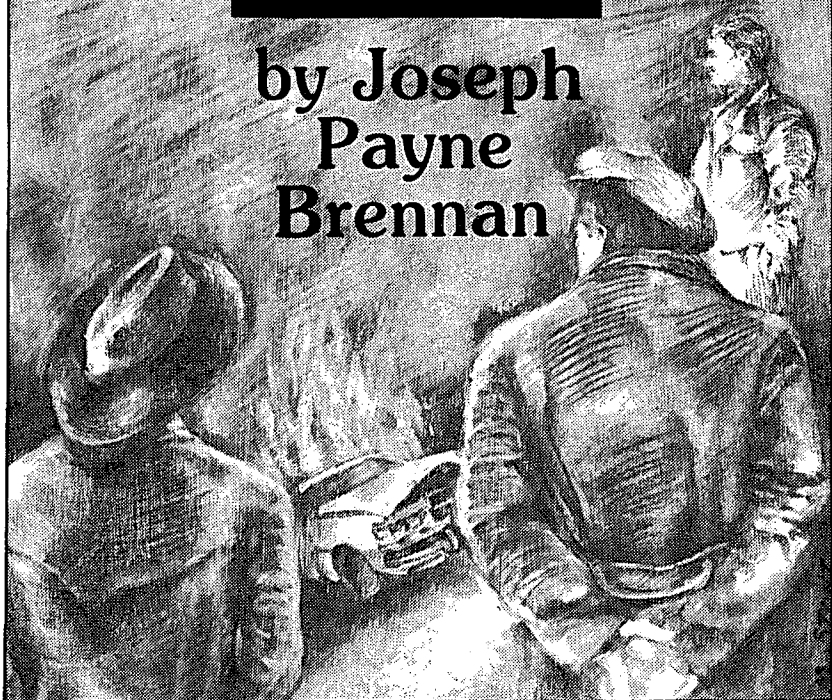
Allan shifted his chair so that his head was turned.

"Aren't we gonna listen to the rest of it, professor?" Donahoe asked.

"Not right now," Allan said.

Junk

by Joseph
Payne
Brennan



The sight of Lieutenant Ralders sitting in Leffing's Victorian living room always strikes me as a somewhat comic spectacle. Perhaps it is the incongruity: the square-shoed, bulky figure of the homicide detective, ill at

ease and perspiring, seated in a room brightened by soft gaslight, a room presenting an interior that would have been far more familiar to someone living in 1890 than to a visitor in the late fall of 1989.

Tonight was no exception. As

I followed Leffing into the room and sat down, Ralders merely nodded. As is usually the case, he appeared both uncomfortable and unhappy.

Lowering himself into his worn Morris chair, Leffing stretched out his long legs and settled back.

"As yet," he told Ralders, "I haven't had time to describe the circumstances to Brennan. Perhaps a brief review will bring things into focus for him."

Although Ralders looked impatient, he agreed readily enough. "Yes, yes. Of course. I did drop in on you without notice."

Leffing addressed me. "As you may know, the city's disagreement with local junkyard owners has led to an impasse. Since the yards no longer accept derelict cars, owners are now abandoning worn-out automobiles all over the city. This presents a problem, but it is not the one we are concerned with. The problem is this: within the last month, three junked cars have been torched during night hours—and in each instance a blackened skeleton has been found in the burned-out shell of the car."

"Any identifications?" I asked.

Leffing shook his head. "The corpses had been soaked with gasoline. They were about half cremated. State forensic specialists have worked valiantly,

but all they have established is that the remains belong to adult male Caucasians. There was an attempt to link the burned bodies to the cars they were found in. This, too, proved useless."

"We couldn't match them up with anyone missing from the area, either," Ralders broke in. "Wallets, rings, and so on all removed."

"From the perpetrator's point of view," I said, "the business makes no sense. Why attract attention to the disposal of victims' bodies? A blazing car, even in the middle of the night, will certainly be noticed by someone. Why not simply dump the bodies in a deep ravine off a country road? They might not be found for months—or years."

"A good point," Leffing conceded, "but if they are found, identification might swiftly follow. Besides, the torched cars were all left in outlying city areas, along little-traveled roads. And, I might add, far from any fire station."

"Were the bodies found in any special positions within the cars?" I inquired.

Ralders laughed humorlessly. "They weren't sittin' behind the wheel. One stuffed in a trunk; two others doubled up in the back. Nice and cosy so's they wouldn't be seen in case a car passed before the wreck exploded."

"Exploded?"

"Neglected to mention," Ralders explained. "A cheap battery-operated timing device was left in the cars. When it went off, the junks blew up. In all three cases we found bits of the timing device, but not enough to trace them back to stores or supply houses."

Leffing glanced across the room toward me. "Any theories, Brennan?"

"Perhaps," I suggested, "the victims were killed outside the city, maybe even outside the state, and transported here in an attempt to make identification more difficult."

"A possibility we must consider," Leffing admitted.

Lieutenant Ralders grunted. "Opens up a real rat's nest. We'd be months checkin' missing persons from fifty states."

"Let us hope we may avoid such a wearisome task," Leffing commented. "Give us some time to ponder the matter, Ralders. Perhaps there is a solution we cannot yet see."

Ralders stood up. "Certainly hope so. I've got a half-dozen other cases hanging over my head."

I left soon after he departed. Leffing, I felt sure, would sit up for hours, sipping sarsaparilla while he reflected on the scant facts so far available.

Before I fell asleep that night, I was rather idiotically considering a good title in the event

the car and body burnings led to a case in which Leffing was substantially involved. I tentatively settled on "The Case of the Cremating Cars." A few hours later, I was summoned out of a sound sleep by the bedside telephone.

Leffing wasted no time. "Another exploding car, Brennan. Right in the area. English Drive, halfway up East Rock. Ralders is on the way. Can you pick me up?"

I acted automatically. I don't believe I was fully awake until I pulled up at 7 Autumn Street. Leffing, waiting at the curb, got in without a word, and we sped down Canner to Whitney toward East Rock Road. Behind us we heard the wail of fire sirens. After taking the turn at East Rock, I pulled over to let the engine pass.

The abandoned car had been pushed off the edge of the drive a few yards beyond the curve near Whitney Dam. It was a steep incline, but a growth of maple trees and mountain laurel bushes had held the wreck in place only a short distance down. By the time we arrived, firemen were working their way toward the blazing shell. The damp night air seemed saturated with the reek of gasoline.

Lieutenant Ralders greeted us grimly. "This makes the fourth. I'll be poundin' a beat if we don't put an end to all this."

Leffing peered down the slope. "You are sure there's a body involved?"

"Willin' to wager a month's pay on it," Ralders replied.

Before the firemen reached the burning car, grass, leaves, and shrubs around the wreck were threatening to start a miniature forest fire. After these fires were contained and the extinguishers got to work on the car, there was little left except blackened metal and glass.

One of the firemen scrambled back up the slope and walked over to Ralders.

"Something in the back, on the floor, sir. Too hot to get it out yet, and it's pretty well covered with the ashes of a burned blanket, but I recognize the smell. It's a body all right—or what's left of one."

Ralders nodded. "Just what I expected." He turned to Leffing. "You can pick your way down there, if you'd like, but I doubt it's worth twisting an ankle. Likely nothing left but a roasted skeleton. Paramedics will be along with a body bag. We'll send you the forensic report when we get it."

Somewhat to my surprise, Leffing made no objection. He faced me with an enigmatic grin. "Well, Brennan, perhaps Ralders is right. A glimpse of the cremated corpse would serve no sensible purpose. Certainly not worth a broken ankle."

"What the devil did we rush out here for?" I blurted, irritation overcoming me.

"When Ralders called," Leffing explained in an apologetic voice, "I acted on impulse, I'm afraid. A few minutes' reflection would have made me realize that nothing was to be gained by speeding to the scene."

Firemen were still working around the wreck. The sheets of flame had subsided into persistent tongues of fire flickering through black, oily smoke.

Looking down the darkened incline, Leffing moved away toward my car. "I fear our solution lies elsewhere, Brennan."

There was little further conversation. After leaving Leffing at Autumn Street, I drove home. I managed an hour's sleep before dawn and woke up feeling less fatigued than I had expected.

The next day my exasperation at Leffing's middle-of-the-night call subsided. After lunch, I telephoned to ask if there were any new developments.

"Forensic reports not yet available," Leffing told me. "Ralders said that careful daylight inspection of the burned-out wreck revealed nothing helpful. The incinerated corpse, as expected, had been stripped of all items that might lead to identification."

"Prospects pretty dim," I said. "I presume we just wait and

hope the forensic report turns up something."

"I expect," Leffing replied, "that the report will be as useless as the previous three. Meanwhile, however, if you are not too busy, I would like to follow through on a theory of my own."

"I'm free all afternoon."

"Capital," he exclaimed. "I'd like to take a drive over to the Eternal Rest Cemetery on Sprucewalk Boulevard."

Mystified but curious, I arrived at Autumn Street a half hour later.

Leffing held the conversation to smalltalk as we rode along, and I knew better than to question him about details of his theory.

Sprucewalk Boulevard runs along the far northern edge of the city. I had some trouble finding the turnoff to the cemetery. I had not visited the necropolis since the interment of a relative over thirty years before.

"Continue on to the far end," Leffing instructed me as we passed through the open gates. I drove slowly along a broad roadway that circled the entire perimeter of the cemetery. Although more crowded with monuments and markers than formerly, the place had been kept in good condition. The grass was trimmed, the shrubs neatly clipped.

I parked at the far end and we left the car. When I pointed out the earth over a freshly filled in grave, Leffing merely glanced at it and looked away. Following the direction of his gaze, I saw that he was scanning the far ground beyond, which extended all the way to the cemetery wall. In contrast to the main section, it was a weedy, overgrown stretch covered with burdock, plantain, and unsightly tufts of tall grass. I assumed it was an as yet unused area of the cemetery proper.

Crossing the road, Leffing strode into this uninviting tract. I followed, still mystified but stubbornly determined not to ask any questions.

Surprised, I inspected the ground. Here and there I glimpsed several small grey-white markers almost hidden from sight by tangled grass and rampant weeds. Bending down, I noticed that some of these miniature markers bore numbers but no names.

"Potter's field," Leffing told me as I straightened up. "The unclaimed dead—paupers, vagrants, perhaps petty criminals."

I shook my head. "Should think they'd all rate a name, at least."

Leffing shrugged. "Some were never identified."

"Pity," I replied. "By the way,

are you looking for a specific marker?"

"No. I am looking for any indications of recent interments in this poor, neglected corner."

"I see none," I said, gazing around. "Nothing but dry grass and undisturbed earth."

"Exactly so," he agreed.

He was not satisfied, however, until we had tramped all the way to the cemetery wall and back again.

When we climbed into the car and drove off, instead of appearing disappointed, he seemed elated.

I could resist no longer. "Why are you so cheerful?" I asked testily.

"Because the case of the incinerated corpses is solved, Brennan. Surely you see the solution now."

"I might see it," I answered sharply, "if you were less reluctant to impart information."

Leffing was startled by my anger. "I am sorry," he said. "I thought the solution was obvious, but of course you have not been pondering the facts and speculating about them for hours as I have."

"That's certainly true."

"Actually, Brennan, I was on the right track even before we visited potter's field. The clue came to me in an offhand, almost accidental fashion. I was thinking about the junked cars dumped about the city, and that

led to a further train of thought. A veritable age of trash and junk, I thought to myself. Junk cars, junk food, junk mail, junk people—and that was it! Junk people. The corpses in the junked cars, I reasoned, instead of being those of murder victims, might merely be unclaimed cadavers somebody wanted to get rid of. Who, I asked myself, could that somebody be? The answer, to me, seemed clear: the operator of a funeral home who had a contract with the city to inter the bodies of vagrants and paupers lacking known relatives or responsible friends. Probably, furthermore, a mortician in financial difficulties. I have ascertained that the undertaker holding the present city contract is heavily in debt."

I frowned. "But how would he profit from this bizarre burning scheme?"

"Under a municipal contract, the city welfare department pays an undertaker a fixed sum for each pauper burial. On the surface this sounds fair. The trouble is, the undertaker, in turn, must pay most of the sum he receives to the cemetery association—for digging and filling a grave, providing a gratuity to a local pastor, paying for transportation of the remains from the morgue to the cemetery, and so on. The undertaker is left with little more than a pittance for his pains."

"So our undertaker, in this case, has been burning the bodies and pocketing the entire fee."

"Just about," Leffing affirmed. "His only expenses have been batteries and a clock for a cheap timing device, plus a gallon or two of gasoline."

"But how on earth did he expect to escape detection? Doesn't the city supervise the pauper interments?"

"The municipal government is seriously understaffed. They do not hire special personnel to check and report on pauper burials. If our mortician went on burning bodies indefinitely, of course, the unused pauper plot would be reported by someone. Presumably the culprit intends to resume burials before then. He probably hopes to amass a tidy little sum by that time."

"Craziest thing I ever heard of," I exclaimed. "I still think he'd have taken far less risk by simply dumping the cadavers in the woods instead of leaving them to attract attention in exploding cars."

"Possibly," Leffing suggested, "he surmised that the homicide squad, ignoring the obvious, would concentrate on tracing missing persons of importance, on ingenious schemes

and involved motivations. That, in fact, appears to be the way Ralders is leaning."

"Have you given him the facts yet?"

"Not yet, Brennan. I intend to telephone him on my return to Autumn Street."

A few evenings later, as I sipped cognac in Leffing's living room, he revealed that Ralders, although relieved that the case had been solved, had seemed let down.

He refilled my glass with a crooked smile. "I believe Ralders expected something truly sensational. He was disappointed at the rather drab denouement."

"What will be the fate of our corpse-burning culprit?"

"The case may drag along with delays and appeals," Leffing answered, "but it appears certain that he will not only lose his contract with the city but his license to practice as well. In addition, he will probably pay a stiff fine and possibly serve a short prison sentence."

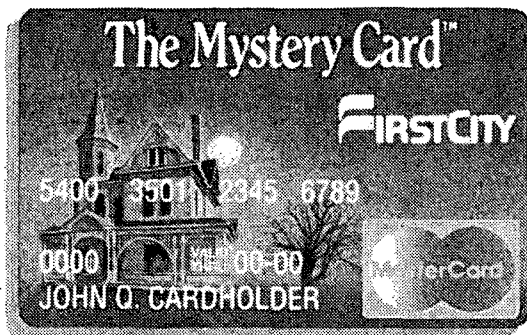
"A heavy price!"

"Heavy indeed, Brennan, but well merited. A pauper's corpse, like any other, deserves a measure of respect and a decent burial."

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FICTION

The Return of the Matchbook Detective

—by
—E. E.
Aydelotte



After I solve the case of Cincinnati Phil and his dastardly girlfriend Sally, one of the trained researchers from *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine** learns of those noble events and soon the scientific details of the case are documented and then distributed throughout the populace with such an impact as only a powerful engine of truth such as AHMM can accomplish. I know that in the future this dissemination is certain to bring me floods of lucrative detecting work as predicted in *The Matchbook Detecting Agent's Pocket Manual* which I carry always in my private detecting vestments. Sooner and more concretely I receive a handsome reward from old Mr. Chamberlain, since my private detecting abilities are responsible for the return to him of his store's jewelry inventory.

"Oh, Warner, now we can get married!" says the fair Olive, my scrawn-like fiancée of seven years. As I have just shown her Mr. Chamberlain's check I am forced to agree it is possible.

Well, once the bag departs the cat, as they say, the corners are ripe for cutting. Olive's mother removes all marriageable obstacles with the enthusiasm of a developer building condominiums in an old-growth forest, and the next Sunday we

find we are having a wedding. Old Mr. Penney consents to be my best man although he continues his campaign to lure me back to my old job as an inspector in his rubber band factory on the east side, which he owns.

"Warner, you dunderhead!" he encourages me just before we go to our places by the altar. "You just reconsider my offer! You can starve yourself trying to live on this detective poppycock if that's how you please, but you're taking on an obligation to young Olive today. Why, you have a *dependent* now, son. Go take your honeymoon, heck, take the whole weekend, but *come back to my factory where you belong!*"

Most of this I know is jealousy speaking, which I am prepared for since I know, "the less-imaginative and more workaday personalities sometimes envy the successful detective's meteoric rise" (*The Matchbook Detecting Agent's Pocket Manual*, page 311). Generally I discount the covetous lacerations received from those trapped in a mundane routine, but this morning is my wedding day and I feel Mr. Penney should give this topic an abeyance.

I am forced to admonish him. "Hush," I say firmly. This makes him so angry that air whistles as he sucks it through his best

*"The Matchbook Detective" appeared in the January 1984 issue of AHMM.

set of teeth, which to honor us he is wearing for this occasion.

We go to the altar and the cassette tape is inserted. Olive appears, wearing a white gown of breathtaking rigidity and moving with her elegant, crab-like stride up the aisle toward us. I know the interminable ceremony is a success because Olive's mother cries continuously.

Soon we are off through rain-drenched streets to honeymoon in the bridal suite of the Merchants & Seamen Hotel and enjoy a breathtaking view of the city's pier district. Very early the next conjugal dawn, which is Monday, Olive declares she is hungry.

"I want a shrimp omelette from room service," Olive says in her seductive whine. "And I want it garnished with an orange slice, and I want one of those fancy toothpicks in the orange slice. You know, Warner, the kind with the colored cellophane ribbon on the end. It would be so pretty and I am so hungry and after all this is our honeymoon. You do love me, Warner, don't you?"

In what other manner does a new husband respond to such a question? I affirm my love with vocable bouquets and then, since they don't actually have room service here at the Merchants & Seamen Hotel, nor phones in the rooms, I quickly

dress so that I may go out and fulfill my bride's necessitous desire.

"Perhaps I'll just take the tiniest nap while you're gone, dearest love," my scrawn-like Olive says.

"I shall return on wings of clay, sweetest princess," I promise, and I am borne out of the suite on the heady incitation of my passion.

The rain has stopped and it is seven A.M. on a clear Monday morning when I walk out the prestigious front entrance of the Merchants & Seamen Hotel. To my surprise I am accosted by what I at first take to be an intoxicated denizen of one of the city's lesser districts. He exits a cab curbside and, immediately upon sighting me, becomes very agitated and hurries to me, dragging a lame foot behind.

He exclaims, "Otto! Hey, Otto, old buddy! It's me, Tucker! Remember me, Two-Toe Tucker? I haven't seen you since we broke out of that hell-hole prison in Panama City five years ago. How are you, buddy?" He slams me several times on the back, in enthusiastic comrade fashion.

I assume a rigid posture of authority, like *The Matchbook Detecting Agent's Pocket Manual* recommends in these situations, and tell him, "You are mistaken, sir. I am not anyone

named 'Otto.' You are speaking with Warner Digby, correspondence graduate of the—"

"Sure, sure," he interrupts. He winks at me knowingly. "Any name you want to use, but you'll always be old Otto to me. Why, if it wasn't for you coming back when I fell outside that cannery and rolling those fifty-five-gallon drums off my legs, those soldiers would have caught me and shot me there for sure, just like they shot Pele at the wall. I owe you my life, Otto."

I say, "If it comforts you to think this, sir, I cannot impede your mad dreams, but—"

"No! No!" he persists. He grips my arm tightly. "I've been thinking about this for years. After we got off that fishing boat that took us to Guerrero Negro, you just up and disappeared without a trace. Everyone wondered how you did that from a place as small and as isolated as Guerrero Negro. It's mysterious, really. Some of the guys thought you went off swimming by yourself the way you liked to do, and drowned in the surf. But I knew better. I always knew you made it out of there, Otto!"

"Don't call me Otto!" I admonish him.

"Any name you like, Otto. Anyway, I decided long ago that if—no, *when*—our paths crossed again, I would pay you back for saving me. And I can,

Otto! I'm into something sweet, here." At this juncture he glances furtively left, then right, then he winks at me conspiratorially. "It's something real sweet and I'm going to cut you in right now, this morning."

I attempt to disengage from this madman and continue my quest for a hot shrimp omelette complete with orange slice garnish and cellophane beribboned toothpick, for my stork-like bride Olive, but the madman has an iron clamp on my arm and won't let go. "Taxi!" he shouts. He gestures to a passing cab, which pulls to the curb near us.

He says, "Oh, I admit that we weren't buddies in stir, Otto. I didn't really know you before the escape, except by sight I mean, because you always kept to yourself. But if you hadn't come back for me during the big breakout I was a goner for sure, and I'm the kind of guy that remembers that. I'm onto a good thing on the docks," his left eye goes wink-wink, "and it's a tough crowd we gotta run with, but there's lots of bucks in it if you can do what you're told," his eye goes wink-wink again, "and by gosh I'm gonna share it with you, Otto!"

This remarkable statement arouses my detecting instincts. "Is illegality involved?" I probe artfully.

"Hah!" he explodes with

laughter. "Heck yes, boy, what do you think I'm talking about? Is illegality involved? Hah! Hah!" The ruffian laughs and otherwise displays his frank appreciation of my question.

His admission forces the situation. In strict adherence to my rigorous correspondence training, I transform from a weary honeymooner fending off a street-corner ruffian into a noble detecting agent standing tall at the wall of society's honor. I unhesitatingly determine to gain the confidence of this ruffian and thereby discover the crime in which he is involved, since, as the manual says, "an honor roll graduate of the Matchbook Detecting School of Yuma, Arizona, is always on duty."

I hope that my new bride Olive will adapt to the revised honeymoonal situation, as it seems likely I will not soon reappear bearing omelettes, but if she does not readily adapt, well, now is as good as any time for her to learn what lot she chose when yesterday she made her vows as a Matchbook Detecting Agent's wife.

I ask the bold question that commits me to this investigation. "What do you say your name is?"

He laughs, "Two-Toe Tucker, as you know darn well. After all, you were there when I lost them at the cannery. C'mon

Otto," he drags me into the open door of the cab, "I'm gonna cut you in on the sweetest deal you ever run into."

On the vinyl rear bench seat of the cab I transition into my undercover character. "Very well, you may call me Otto," I instruct him. "May I call you Two-Toe?"

"Heck, Otto, you can call me 'Mud' or anything else that gets your fancy, after what you did in Panama City. Driver! Take us to Pier 7."

And so it is that there, smack in the middle of my honeymoon, I depart on a case, hot in pursuit of those who besmire our fair city.

Our cab turns onto Lower King Kiley Boulevard and we roll along the waterfront toward Pier 7. The last waterfront location prior to the pier is a vast muddy construction site. A huge banner raised on temporary poles spells:

FOCHE INDUSTRIES LTD.
CONVENTION CENTER
PHASE I
WELCOME GROUND-
BREAKERS

and on a flatbed truck parked under the banner a technician stands at a microphone and says, "Testing, testing, testing," through a portable PA system.

"Turn here, driver," says Two-

Toe Tucker. Past the construction site we turn left into the Pier 7 complex. We stop at the security shack. A uniformed guard comes out and peers at the driver suspiciously, then looks into the back seat and recognizes Two-Toe.

"Oh, hello, Tuck," he says. To the driver he says, "Go ahead, Mac, it's okay," and we pull into the Pier 7 complex. A parking lot and an office building are on the left, warehouses are on the right, the pier is straight ahead, and on the pier the largest crane I have ever seen is busy unloading a cargo vessel.

We drive around to the warehouse farthest from the pier, which is marked WAREHOUSE 72. Two-Toe Tucker gives the cabbie a twenty dollar bill for the \$7.15 fare and casually tells him to keep the change. My suspicions of profitable illegalities strengthen. Two-Toe and I walk into the dim expanse of Warehouse 72.

Inside this warehouse dusky men wearing hardhats and leather gloves move helter-skelter from left to right. Others hurry right to left. A giant forklift rumbles past with a pallet load of wooden crates.

Two-Toe Tucker shouts into my ear above the roar of the forklift, "These are the incoming goods from that freighter. They've passed customs and they're brought here to be sifted

for distribution. That's where you and I come in — distribution!" Again, Two-Toe gives me that wink.

Dragging his lame foot, Two-Toe leads me between mountainous stacks of crates, all bearing the stenciled marking:

ARROQUIL PIPE
& FITTINGS LTD.

BRAZIL
DO NOT DROP

Two-Toe points to the stenciled "Brazil" and says, "That's just for the paperwork. The merchandise really originated in Makassar, in the Celebes; then we sent it south of the Canal Zone to Garachine. We had a freighter come up from Rio and transit the canal, then jog down to Garachine and load these goods from Makassar. Then the freighter made the run up the Pacific coast to our harbor. All that was just to give the merchandise a reasonable history for customs. As far as they're concerned, this entire load came from Brazil, since the freighter and the paperwork came from there."

At the rear of the warehouse we arrive at a locked door and Two-Toe knocks. A peephole clangs open and we see an eye seeing us. Locks and latches click. The door swings back. A huge tough character holding a bright new assault rifle fills

the doorway. The large rifleman jerks a thumb at me and growls at Two-Toe, "Who's he?"

Two-Toe is right at home with his tough guy. "This is Otto Wallik. He's with me, Jerry. He's okay."

This tough guy Jerry looks me up, looks me down, makes a face of benevolent disgust, then steps aside and motions with the assault rifle for us to come in.

We enter a clattering realm of criminality. To our right a large sweating fellow without a shirt is opening wooden crates with a crowbar and a mallet. To our left a small man in coveralls is reclosing the crates with a pneumatic nail gun. Against the far wall lean four new assault rifles. A man in a silk suit and two more tough-looking sorts lounge against that wall, one resting another shiny assault rifle over his shoulder and watching the room with eyes that are bored, yet alert.

Directly in front of us are rows of tables covered with neatly ordered metal parts taken from the opened crates. There are tubes and pipes and levers and valves and other such shiny metallic shapes. Seven women in white coveralls, white shoes, and rubber gloves busy themselves with the stacked parts. There are no pockets on their coveralls.

"This is the separation room,"

says Two-Toe. "This is where the merchandise is removed from its packaging. Then the packaging is replaced in its crates and sent out for delivery to its buyers—the real buyers listed on the customs paperwork, I mean."

Again Two-Toe gives me that conspiratorial wink. "Here's where you and I get involved. The merchandise is weighed here and then driven to our distribution center across town. From the distribution center it goes out across the city; sometimes across the country, even."

Two-Toe leads me to the man in the silk suit. As recommended by the manual I engage his eyes robustly. I suspect I am meeting the criminal mastermind behind an evil scheme that befouls our fair metropolis.

Two-Toe says, "Mr. Bonney, this is Otto Wallik. He's our kind of guy and he could use a job here. I'll vouch for him. He was with me in Panama City when I got this." Two-Toe raises his maimed foot to illustrate.

There is a pause and then Mr. Bonney says to me, "You're the famous Otto? I've pictured you differently. Tucker's told us that story about the Panama City breakout, lots of times." Mr. Bonney ruminates.

"Okay!" he says suddenly, deciding. "Tucker, if this is your famous Otto we'll take him on approval. But Tucker—"



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"Yes?" says Two-Toe.

"You know what happens to you if he's not a right guy, don't you?"

Two-Toe looks down. "Yes."

"You still vouch for him?" asks Mr. Bonney.

Two-Toe looks up. "Yes."

Mr. Bonney turns to me. "Okay. You're hired on approval. We don't like you, we let you go. You screw up, maybe we *don't* let you go, know what I mean?"

I respond, "Yes, I comprehend the principle of retribution as practiced by those outside of the law. I do not fear it."

Mr. Bonney gazes at me as if upon a bug in his hot chocolate. "Aren't you the queer one? Okay, this week you drive with Tucker here. He'll show you the ropes. It's a straight grand a week to start and after that we'll see. It's up to you, really. And one other thing: you're working for me, you understand? You're not working for Tucker, you're not working for Mr. Pagliacci, you're working for me. Got it, Otto?"

I say, "I comprehend fully the details of employment and I accept them as offered by you. However, what is it we will be driving? What has come fur-tively into the U.S. of A. in these wooden crates which all are stamped 'Arroquil Pipe & Fittings Limited'?"

Mr. Bonney replies, "Ice,

packed in freezeless faucets."

Two-Toe Tucker and Mr. Bonney gaze at me expectantly. As a moment passes they are unable to maintain straight faces and they laugh.

"Get it, Otto?" Two-Toe says, smiling widely. "We get ice from Southeast Asia, hide it inside freezeless hose bibs manufactured in Brazil, and smuggle it past customs as plumbing supplies. Get it? We smuggle ice inside freezeless faucets!"

"Ice?" I inquire, unhappily not comprehending the irony which is so vivid for Two-Toe and Mr. Bonney.

"You know, crystal meth," says Two-Toe.

I say, "Oh! Yes, I see," still uncomprehending but desiring to conceal my ignorance of this underworld terminology. I force an appreciative but false chuckle and reflect to myself that I must at first opportunity sign up for the advanced seminar on criminal patois offered by the Matchbook Detecting School of Yuma, Arizona.

"Okay, get working, you two," says Mr. Bonney.

Two-Toe leads me out of the separation room. "This ice is pure gold, Otto. We can't get enough, and we can sell all we can get. In some parts of the city the gangs are actually fighting each other over their franchise rights with us. C'mon, let's get loaded and roll."

We walk out of Warehouse 72, blinking a little in the daylight, and Two-Toe locates a new green Chrysler in the lot. He says, "This one'll do. You drive."

We get in. The keys are in the ignition. Under his direction I back the sedan up to a loading dock, and we get out and open the trunk. The tough-looking rifleman from the separation room doorway, Jerry, appears on the dock minus his rifle. He carries a suitcase and a rolled-up blanket and hands both down. The blanket is heavy and it clanks when I grab it. I put it in the Chrysler's trunk, pull back the cover, and see three shiny new military-style assault rifles rolled inside the rug.

"For protection," Jerry says. He goes back into the warehouse.

"Wheeeouu!" says Two-Toe. He slams the suitcase into the trunk and gives it a hearty slap. "You know what's in here, Otto? Ice! Almost a pound of crystal meth! We've got us a million dollar cargo, buddy. Let's roll!"

Inside the car Two-Toe says, "You know Pagliacci's Garage over on Seventh in the Regrade District?"

I say, "Two-Toe, I am moderately familiar with the Seventh Street environs."

He says, "Good. Get us to where Seventh crosses Edison."

At the exit of the Pier 7 complex I stop the Chrysler opposite the guard shack. I tell Two-Toe, "I find it necessary to telephone my wife. She does not know my name is now Otto and that you have cut me in on the sweetest deal I have ever run into, and she is still expecting me to return with her breakfast and is likely becoming rapacious in her unfed solitude."

"Well, see, we aren't supposed to call *anyone* when we're on a run," Two-Toe says. Then, "Ah, heck, go ahead and do it quick. Tell her you'll be in for your dinner."

I get out of the car and step rapidly to the guard shack. The uniformed guard comes out to greet me. I produce my special imitation vinyl case, open it with a practiced flip, and display my official copper-plated badge. I am careful to place my body so as to shield my badge from Two-Toe's view.

"Huh!" the guard says with what I take to be admiration. "Badge Number 311 from the Matchbook Detecting School of Yuma, Arizona."

"Yes, I am a private detecting agent and I am working deep cover. As a fellow peace officer, I request your urgent and surreptitious assistance."

The guard looks at the car and says, "What are you doing with Tucker?"

I say, "I will explain Two-Toe

Tucker's involvement later. I have uncovered a dastardly smuggling ring operating in a secret room right here on Pier 7. We must inform the authorities. Will you please use the telephone in your guard shack to call Detective Lieutenant Miller at police headquarters? I have had professional intercourse with him previously, and my name should be an alarm bell in his ear, so to speak. Tell him Warner Digby has broken open a big case, and to send a full squad of his bravest officers straight away."

The guard says, "Well now." He looks me over musingly.

I see he remains unmotivated. The manual does warn that "the lower-paid service guards oftentimes lack crime-fighting aggression." I attempt to mobilize him by revealing tempting details of the smuggling ring.

I say, "I have deduced this crime from the slim evidence revealed inadvertently by the criminals under my trained questioning. Weapons, you see, have been disassembled and then smuggled past customs concealed as plumbing parts. There is a secret room in Warehouse 72, guarded by armed men, where a skilled group of female technicians reassembles the rifles from their plumbing-like components. From that secret room the weapons are clan-

destinely driven out to all neighborhoods of our fair city and are sold to gangs of ruffian youths."

The guard says, "You're kidding me, right? This is another one of Mr. Bonney's practical jokes, right?"

I say, "I wish I was kidding. Mr. Bonney is the criminal ringleader. He even admitted to me the existence of what, if my deduction is correct, is an exotic explosive called 'crystal meth,' nicknamed 'ice,' which these gangs are so desperate to obtain that they battle over its deliveries."

"You think crystal meth is an explosive?"

"Well, it was hard to figure out at first. But it's the only deduction that fits, when you consider all the new assault rifles I've seen, and the gang battles I've been told of. Crystal meth must be the name of an exotic yet very concentrated explosive. Do you know that less than a pound will fit in a common suitcase? I think there's a gang war brewing up in our city, I think it's a war that will be fueled by smuggled weaponry, and I think the safety of each ordinary citizen in our metropolis now rests in your hands. Will you fulfill your duty? Will you help me? Will you call Detective Lieutenant Miller with my critical message?"

The guard's eyes blink rapidly. "You *are* serious, aren't you?"

As the manual recommends, I draw myself into a posture of rigidity and gravely indicate the affirmative.

The guard jerks his head as if trying to toss off a horsefly. He says, "Okay, let's see, how about you stand up there by the fence and keep a watch out for your criminals while I go into the guard shack and call your detective lieutenant down at police headquarters."

Which is what we do, the guard and me, but the subsequent events rearrange themselves. I go over by the chain link fence and peer watch-like towards Warehouse 72. The guard goes into his shack and telephones. I can't hear him, but I see him talking.

Over in the Chrysler, Two-Toe becomes impatient and honks the horn. I wave a calming hand at him. He issues a forceful gesture to join him. I step towards him, intending to distract him on some pretext until the police can arrive in answer to my summons. I am standing on the passenger side of the Chrysler successfully engaged in a conversational ploy when I hear the squeal of a heavy vehicle braking, look up and see SLAM! a panel truck crash into the rear of our Chrysler, which slides several feet

and snaps back Two-Toe's head most convincingly.

"Hey!" I say. Three burly men get out of the cab. The guard comes running over from the guard shack.

One of the burly men points at me, looks at the guard, and says, "Him?"

The guard says, "Yeah. He's nuts, but he knows enough to queer things for us."

I am set upon suddenly by two of the burls. This surprises me, yet I am thrilled to test in actual struggle the concepts I have studied in the excellent step-by-step diagrams of self-defense techniques provided in the correspondence course of the Matchbook Detecting School of Yuma, Arizona. Unfortunately, although I perform these procedures with precision and verve, the results are disappointing.

"Get his wrists," says one burl. Despite my stalwart efforts I am dragged, tied by the wrists, and tossed into the rear of their truck. I make a mental note to review the relevant portions of Workbook 3 at my earliest convenience. A moment later Two-Toe, still groggy from the crash, lands sack-like across my legs. The largest burl leans in, grins, and says, "Good night, junior," even though my name is Warner, or as far as he is concerned, Otto. His hand flashes down and a sap snaps against

the base of my neck. My brain explodes inward and I flash fireworks-like into a deep pit of unconsciousness.

I wake to the feel of cold steel flat against my back, a sore noggin, and thick hemp binding my wrists and ankles. Through the steel I feel the slow pulses of a heavy engine. I struggle to a sitting position.

A deep voice says, "Ah, sleeping beauty wakes." One of the burls is standing over me smoking a cigarette. It is the one who called me junior and then thumped me with the sap. Two-Toe is sitting next to me, bound in a manner identical to me.

"They've got us on the freighter," says Two-Toe. "Otto; *what* did you do?"

The burl flicks his cigarette butt away and wags his finger sarcastically. "Now, don't you boys bicker. Tonight this rust-bucket puts out to sea and around midnight you'll be put over the side with the other garbage. Until then you keep each other company here. Me, I'm going topside for some air." He looks at Two-Toe significantly. "It stinks of rat in here."

After he's gone Two-Toe says again, "Otto, *what* did you do?"

I say, "I asked the guard at the gate to call the police to raid the smuggling ring."

Two-Toe says, "That doesn't make sense. Why, you're one of us, you always have been. Why

would you do that, Otto?"

I say, "Because my name is Warner Digby and I am a private detecting agent and I am sworn to serve all that is true and just in our society, that's why."

Two-Toe rolls this around in his head. After a moment he says, "You should have told me you had a new gig, Otto. I didn't know. How could I know that? Tonight we're gonna sleep with the fishes."

I say, "It's not settled yet. We have the advantage, because these hooligans don't realize they're up against an honor roll graduate of the Matchbook Detecting School of Yuma, Arizona."

Two-Toe says, "You went back to school, huh, Otto? Okay, okay, I can see that. You just got a new racket to replace the old racket. I can see that, sure."

I say, "I recommend we leave this vessel as rapidly as possible, Two-Toe."

Two-Toe says, "Huh? Oh, right! We should just walk out of here, right? It looks to me like we're in it tough again, Otto, worse than Panama City."

Bound tightly hand and foot I flop over on my side and squirm behind Two-Toe. I ask, "Can you reach the inside pocket of my jacket? Can you get to my badge?"

Two-Toe is sitting up and is bound similar to me, hands be-

hind back. He makes a half-hearted attempt to reach my pocket with his tied hands. "You got a badge, too? What do you want your badge for now? None of these apes are gonna let us go just because you show them some P.I. badge, Otto."

I admonish him, "Two-Toe! This isn't an ordinary badge. This is a Matchbook Detecting badge and comes complete with integral whistle, hidden blade, and can opener."

He gets interested and tries harder to reach. "You mean blade, like in cuts rope, that kind of blade? I can feel it with my fingers. Lean forward. Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" The badge, encased in its imitation vinyl case, comes free of my pocket and Two-Toe grasps it securely with his bound hands.

"Hold still right there," I tell him. I squirm down and take the badge in my lips. I flip the case open, grab the secret door with my teeth, and yank open the hidden compartment. The bottom of the genuine copper-clad badge, sharpened to a razor's edge, is exposed for use.

Holding the top of the badge with my mouth I saw the blade back and forth over the thick hemp that binds Two-Toe's hands. It is tedious work and I regret not ordering the optional serrated edge when I had the opportunity.

Two-Toe says, "Hey, Otto,

that thing's kind of the Swiss Army knife of badges, isn't it? I'm gonna have to get me one."

Once I free his hands it requires only moments more for Two-Toe to untie us both. We stand up, rubbing our wrists. I say, "You have to decide now, Two-Toe. Are you with me, or with them?"

Two-Toe says, "There isn't anything to decide, they already did that for us, Otto. It's you and me again, just like in Panama City. Let's go!"

We cautiously make our way along passageways and up ladders and along catwalks. Not a soul stirs on the ship, just the steady slow STRUM-STRUM-STRUM of the big engine, far below. We are creeping out of a passageway on the main deck of the freighter when, "Watch out!" hisses Two-Toe. He grabs my arm and drags me back. We both peer carefully around the corner and see three burly toughs, the very ones who kidnapped us from the Chrysler at the guard shack, smoking cigarettes at the top of the gangway and talking.

Two-Toe whispers, "We'll never get out that way."

"Look!" I say, pointing forward.

On the forecastle is a large wooden pallet, and on the pallet are a dirty tarp and a battered old compressor. The pallet is rigged at each corner to cables

that run upward to the end hook of a crane's main cable. Pierside, the arm of a huge mobile crane is pivoted over the ship. Everything is idle and unattended.

"They must be offloading that old compressor to be scrapped," says Two-Toe.

I say, "I bet they broke for lunch. We could sneak under that tarp now, and if they load it straight onto a truck for the dump, that's our ticket out of here, Two-Toe."

Which is what we do. Lickety-split and we're both under the tarp, snug and silent as bugs in an ear of corn. It's only twenty minutes till we hear footsteps, hear the sound of winches and motors, feel a man tugging on the pallet's suspension cables, and then magically we float upward and outward towards the pier, towards freedom.

Then it all stops. We float in the air maybe eighty feet over the pier and the crane stops swinging, its motor shuts down, and we are left gently rocking on our lofty perch.

Two-Toe hisses, "We're a pair of malletheads, Otto! There isn't any bottom on a pallet! They've seen us through the slats. They can see us clear from down there on the pier."

It's true. Down on the pier men are pointing at us. We sit up and toss the tarp aside. It is

a nice perch, actually, peaceful and calm and we can see all over the harbor.

Way below and over at the base of the freighter's gangplank stands Mr. Bonney. He points to the crane operator, then at us, then he makes a crushing motion with his hands, slapping them together like smashing a bug. Up in the control cab of the three and a half ton mobile crane we can see the operator clearly through the glass. He nods "yes" to Mr. Bonney and restarts his motor.

Two-Toe says, "I think we're going to experience an industrial accident, Otto."

The mobile crane is a huge affair, set on four immense tires each larger than an elephant, the control cab set four stories up and accessed by a steel ladder welded to the shell of the beast. We are suspended by cable from its long, high arm.

The crane operator moves a lever and we lurch, then swing left. "Hang on!" cries Two-Toe. The operator reverses two levers and we snap right, the compressor shifting on the pallet and the pallet tilting. We hold on intently. The pallet swings wildly over and back, and over and back. The compressor breaks free and slips between Two-Toe and me. I don't hear it hit the pier because I'm busy hanging on, but it's a much easier ride once the weight of the

machinery is gone.

The crane arm begins to raise. The operator tries a steeper angle on us. Now he swings us forward, then back, then forward. The arcs become longer and longer in the air. Our necks whip, our fingers bleed, we hold on for survival and nothing else matters.

Suddenly, CRASH!, the pallet bashes back into the crane arm, tips around, and the cable wraps on the exposed mechanism of the arm. The pallet is cocked over crazily and is hung up on the crane arm.

"Follow me!" I shout at Two-Toe. I half jump, half fall onto the crane arm, Two-Toe close behind. We scramble down to the base of the arm and follow jutting handholds over to the main ladder, and thus into the control cab.

"I don't believe it," says the operator.

"Believe it," says Two-Toe, grabbing him by his collar while I grab his legs. We swing him, "One-two-three," and sling him out the open door of the cab. He describes a long parabolic arc in the sky that terminates at the harbor water with an impressive splash. He pops back up, bobs around for a moment, and then begins to swim.

Now the case really begins to exhilarate. I leap into the operator's seat and manipulate a complicated mess of levers that

control all functions of the mobile crane, it being my intention to drive us off this pier to freedom. After a few false attempts I identify the appropriate levers, the immense three and a half ton mobile crane builds gradually to its maximum speed of about five miles an hour, and we drive slowly down the pier towards the shore.

"WHEEOUU!" shouts Two-Toe, enjoying this favorable turn of events. "Go, Otto! Go!"

Unfortunately there is some confusion regarding which lever controls the crane arm because the long arm slowly rotates to the right as we drive down the pier. After some futile experiments trying to immobilize it, I give up and concentrate on my driving and leave the crane arm to rotate.

"Maybe it's looking for magnetic north," offers Two-Toe.

Down below the scuttling hooligans seem the size of ants. A car tries to drive in front and block us and is flattened under one of our immense tires, the driver leaping clear at the last possible moment. Two-Toe and I barely feel a gentle *splunk!* as we crush the car.

We rumble off the pier onto the shore pavement, halfway to freedom, passing between the pier offices and Warehouse 71. Three men carrying assault rifles run alongside us, gain handholds, and start climbing

the long ladder up to our control cab.

Two-Toe finds a large toolbox under the driver's chair, removes a hammer, and flings it down the ladder at the rifleman.

He says, "This'll slow them down. Ahh! I just missed Bernard!" He reaches back into the toolbox and hefts out a thick wrench for another attempt.

Past the office there is oil spilled on the roadway, and as we approach that spot a bullet bounces off our control cab. I look down and see way back below, small as a toy soldier, a rifleman on the pier firing at us. He shifts his aim to our huge tires and fires a burst into one of them. It promptly goes *klop!-klop!-klop!-klop!* and deflates. The tire shreds off huge hunks of rubber as it disintegrates.

Between the flattening tire and the oil on the road, we lurch into a vicious skid to the right, swing involuntarily off the road, and move behind the office building. We are fishtailing wildly. Two-Toe is holding on desperately and is flung almost out the open door of the control cab.

"%%&%%, Otto!" curses Two-Toe, in apparent admiration of my skilled driving.

Now, I don't know if you've ever been in a skid in a three and a half ton mobile crane at

five miles an hour, but I can tell you from first-hand experience that it is not a picnic situation and is one that rattles lesser men. Objects approach in slow motion and float past before the controls can have effect. The immense mass of the crane goes where it wants to rather than where the operator tells it to go.

Desperately I reverse the steering direction as recommended in this situation to all graduates of the Matchbook Detecting School of Yuma, Arizona, and after about fifty yards of slow motion mayhem I finally regain mastery over our massive steed, although one wheel is riding on the rim and Two-Toe is hanging out the door suspended only by his hands. I leap from the driver's chair and haul him back in, the crane churning driverless forward, but at least now in a straight line.

Back in the cab Two-Toe takes a deep breath of relief, glances casually forward, his eyes grow huge and he says, "Look out! Otto!" We crash square into the chain link fence behind the office building, exit the Pier 7 complex, and enter the muddy construction yard of the future convention center where it seems they are currently embroiled in a festive groundbreaking ceremony in which we are inexorably destined to participate.

Ten yards from the fence is a flatbed truck set up as a temporary stage. There is a microphone on the truck and a group of well-dressed dignitaries around the microphone. Two of the dignitaries hold shovels. Over the truck the above-mentioned huge banner flies from temporary poles set in the muddy ground. Arrayed in front of the flatbed truck are a band, a police honor guard, a clump of construction workers in hard hats, cameramen, and various invited observers who form the general audience. Temporary wooden runways have been built and placed to keep the audience up off the muddy field. Flags are flying. All in all, it is quite festive.

Two-Toe exclaims delightfully, "A band! Say! This is even more fun than our Panama City break!"

We churn inexorably across the muddy site, crane arm rotating, straight towards the flatbed truck. On the truck the ant-like dignitaries turn and tilt their tiny, well-coiffed heads up towards us, then clamber down and scurry fearfully away. After a few yards one slips full-face into the muddy field. No one comes back to assist him.

The band scatters, the audience backs away, only the construction workers stand fast, and our mobile crane slams into the flatbed truck, which wedges

under one of our massive front wheels. The mobile crane tilts sideways, halts, and the drive wheels whip ineffectually at the mud. We are effectively jammed against the truck carcass. The spinning wheels fling muck all about. I locate the switch and shut down the motor.

The hard-hatted construction workers, the only group that didn't retreat, spontaneously clap and cheer. They love us.

Our mobile crane is cocked over like the Tower of Pisa. Two-Toe peers out the doorway and down the ladder at the riflemen. He says, "They're still coming up and they look pretty mad." He reaches for another tool.

I say, "I am going for reinforcements, Two-Toe. Can you hold off these desperadoes until I return with the official forces of justice?"

Two-Toe throws a heavy spanner. "Go, Otto! Go! I can hold 'em as long as these tools last!"

Stepping out of the cab I inch my way around to the base of the crane arm, walk up the triangulated lattice of the arm to the still-tangled pallet, and disconnect the crane's main cable from the auxiliary cables that connect to each corner of the pallet. Thus loosed, the pallet tips sideways and crashes away down the side of the mo-

bile crane, bouncing like a pebble down a slope. Simultaneously the heavy main cable, freed from the entanglement, swings away from the crane with myself holding desperately to the hook on its end. I find myself playing crack-the-whip towards the ground.

Now, in my rapid mental preparations for this feat I envision a light and gentle swing down to a feathery and erect landing on the open construction yard below, but there being no specific advice in the manual to prepare me for this sort of vine-like activity, I miscalculate and my results are divergent from my intent. The cable is far heavier than I anticipate and swings out at a remarkable angle and velocity. I ride the hook down, my hair rippling back in the wind, and halfway down I crash through the banner and carry it down wrapped around me and streaming behind flag-like and proud. A number of dignitaries routed from the flatbed truck are gawking at the wreck of the crane when my abrupt approach convinces them to flee again in what, in retrospect, is a most comical manner.

I terminate my cable ride with a crash that bodes great risk of bodily harm to my detecting self, but to my great good fortune I land atop one of the softer and less agile digni-

taries. I drive him marshmallow-like into the muddy construction yard, but his spongy high-cholesterol corpus cushions both of us from fatal damage, somewhat as an air bag works in a car wreck.

For a moment all is still, then uniformed arms lift me out of the mud. I am in the grips of the mayor's police honor guard, who are on hand for the ground-breaking.

A muddy apparition moans in the mud. "Are you okay, mayor?" asks an officer. With dismay I realize that it is our city's very own Mayor Pratt I have utilized to cushion my descent.

"I think his arm is broken," says an officer.

"How can you tell under all that mud?" says another.

My wrists are pinned behind my back and bound with metallic shackles. A uniformed officer jerks me free of the banner, sets me on my feet, and says, "I arrest you for assault on a public official. Your rights are as follows—" and he commences to Miranda me.

I tell him, "I am well aware of these rights, officer. I have memorized them and need not read them from a card as you so slothfully do. You have the wrong man, officer! You are arresting Warner Digby, a trained detecting operative from the Matchbook Detecting School of

Yuma, Arizona, who has uncovered an evil conspiracy to arm the underworld elements of our fair city. There!" I nod my head towards the mobile crane. "There are the criminals who want shackling."

The three riflemen on the crane have abandoned their ascent and are climbing down. A police officer walks through the muck towards the crane. The lowest rifleman sees the officer approach, panics, and snaps off a round. The bullet misses and slaps into the mud. The officer darts back towards us, drawing his pistol. People scatter, well-dressed dignitaries dive into the mud, a woman in high heels and a very nice dress tries to run and ends up tobogganing on her skirt down a muddy incline towards the harbor. An officer has a walkie-talkie out and is calling for police reinforcements, specifying heavy weapons and bulletproof vests.

The riflemen leap down from the crane and run back towards Pier 7. The police honor guard, in all their muddy dress-uniform splendor, track behind with drawn pistols. An officer takes a two-handed shot, the riflemen return long bursts from their semiautomatic weapons, and more pistol shots crack out. In moments the three riflemen and the pursuing officers from the mayor's police honor guard are out of sight beyond

the Pier 7 office.

Two-Toe, laughing with delight at this show, climbs down from the crane. In the confusion he is unnoticed by the authorities. He drags his bad leg into the obscurity of the muddy mob of construction workers, dignitaries, and band members who are milling about excitedly. When last I see Two-Toe Tucker he is heading towards King Kiley Boulevard.

Bursts of gunfire ring out from the Pier 7 complex. A television helicopter clatters low overhead. In the mud the mayor holds his broken arm. He looks at me. "Who the hell are you?" he demands.

I say, "Your Honor, I am Warner Digby, honor roll graduate of the Matchbook Detecting School of Yuma, Arizona, at your service."

The mayor looks at my face, looks at my hands cuffed behind me, and moans softly. He struggles to stand, entangles his feet in the "Welcome Groundbreakers" banner, and slaps sideways back into the mud. He must be very tired because he stays down in that position until the ambulance crew reaches us.

It is almost an hour later that my old acquaintance Detective Lieutenant Miller joins us at the convention center construction site, after having assisted the SWAT team during its suc-

cessful assault on Warehouse 72. Occasional shots can still be heard in the distance.

Lieutenant Miller tells the officers who are detaining me, "There's still two guys holed up on the freighter. We'll get them in a little bit, they don't have a chance." He sees me and asks the officers, "Is this the acrobat I heard about?" and then, suddenly recognizing me, exclaims, "It's *you* again, Warner!"

I am touched he remembers me with such fervor, and I greet him heartily. "Hello, lieutenant, it's very pleasant to be on a case with you again."

Detective Lieutenant Miller takes his glasses off and vigorously rubs his hand over his eyes and face. "Brrr," he says, which is an odd thing to say.

I explain the case to him, using the simplest possible terms, since the manual warns that official detectives will sometimes be a little slow on the uptake, which fact is easily proved by my continued yet mistaken handcuffing.

After I complete my dissertation the lieutenant says, "You think Bonney is smuggling weapons? You think crystal meth is a concentrated explosive? Warner, you're still a dunthead!" And again the lieutenant does that thing where he rubs his hand across his eyes and goes, "Brrr!"

After rubbing his face a while

he calms down and says, almost gently, "Look, son, 'ice' is slang for crystalline methamphetamine, or 'crystal meth' for short. It's very popular in Asia. It's an illegal drug that is smoked. It's starting to be sold by the street gangs in our city, and already it's out of control. It's a vicious drug, maybe the most addictive we've ever seen. It's cheaper than cocaine, and it keeps them high longer than crack. It makes them violent, it makes them paranoid, it makes them crazy and belligerent. It's a straight plague on our city, no, less. *That's* what Bonney is smuggling in, not weapons. We found over five pounds in Warehouse 72. Do you know what that can do to this town? Five pounds of crystal meth?"

He continues, "Now, those assault rifles they have are U.S. made and are just a standard item for protection of their merchandise. You can buy those rifles legally at any gun shop in this city. The rifles don't mean anything."

"But I'm certain I saw them assembling rifles from the Brazilian plumbing supplies," I maintain doubtfully.

Detective Lieutenant Miller rolls his eyes. He says, "Warner, Warner, you *are* a piece of work, aren't you? Listen, son, last time I saw you, you were running a P.I. agency without the proper state license. You're

not investigating without a license again, are you? After my warning to you?"

I sheepishly admit that I am still unlicensed, but add that, "I interpreted our agreement at our last encounter, regarding your personal arrest of Cincinnati Phil and his dastardly girlfriend Sally whom I myself had apprehended, to mean that I traded you their custody for your official sanction which allows me to proceed in my profession without the formality of licensing by the state. Being unlicensed is an advantage I have used to move unhindered and unrecognized among the criminal classes while I hunt transgressors such as Mr. Bonney and his band of ruffians."

Detective Lieutenant Miller ejaculates angrily, "We have no such agreement, Warner. None! If you think we have, you're dreaming. I hope you know a good lawyer, because you're, going up on charges this afternoon. You need a stiff lesson, Warner, and I'm going to talk to the district attorney myself about you."

As I ponder this promise a short, stout man strides energetically through the mud to us, accompanied by a scurrying group of assistants who entreat him to heed their urgent advice, which is to depart this area immediately. The man in

the center slaps their hands away, steps up to our small group, and asks, "Is this the boy? Is this the hero?"

Detective Lieutenant Miller says, "This is Warner Digby, Mr. Foche, but I wouldn't exactly call him a hero."

Mr. Foche says, "I would. I'd like to shake hands with the man who unmasked those drug criminals." Mr. Foche extends his hand, but with my shackled wrists I can reciprocate only with a gesture of helplessness.

Furious, Mr. Foche turns to the lieutenant. "Why is this man handcuffed, officer?"

Lieutenant Miller says icily, "You are not in command here, sir. This is a police matter and this man is a prisoner."

Mr. Foche says icily, "We'll see." He raises his left hand and snaps his fingers. The tallest aide-de-camp rushes to him, is whispered to, and dashes off. Mr. Foche gazes evenly at Detective Lieutenant Miller, who matches his gaze.

Presently we hear, "Miller! What have you done, Miller?" A captain of police rumbles through the mud, dressed for the groundbreaking in full dress uniform complete with muddy gold braid.

To Mr. Foche he says, "Mr. Foche, I'm sorry about this. I'm certain it is simply an error of overzealousness. Miller is one of our best men."

To Detective Lieutenant Miller he says, "Why is this man in handcuffs? Release him immediately."

The face of Lieutenant Miller turns pink, then red, then hot red, and he begins to vibrate. "Sir, I am about to send this man uptown for booking."

"What are the charges?" asks the captain.

"Assault on a public official, for one," says the lieutenant.

Mr. Foche says, "I don't think Mayor Pratt will press charges against the man who unmasked these drug criminals."

"He broke the mayor's *arm*, sir," Lieutenant Miller appeals to the captain.

Mr. Foche points across the construction yard to where the mayor, arm in an aluminum splint and sitting on the tailgate of an ambulance, is holding forth for three television crews. "Look at him. The reporters are treating him as the injured hero of a big drug arrest. Remember, Mayor Pratt is up for reelection next year. I doubt he'll want to press charges, and as his campaign chairman and largest contributor, I will certainly advise him against it."

Detective Lieutenant Miller indicates the flattened chain link fence, the twisted flatbed truck, and the cockeyed three and a half ton mobile crane. "Destruction of property, sir."

Mr. Foche chuckles. "Oh, that. Well, the fence and the truck belong to Foche Industries, Limited, and we won't be pressing charges. As for the crane, well, I see by the markings on its side that it's leased from the Madigan Corporation. I sit on the board of directors of the Madigan Corporation. No, I don't think a charge of destruction of property is appropriate here, lieutenant."

"Warner was performing investigative services without a proper state license." The lieutenant spits out those last words.

Mr. Foche chuckles. "Is that the best you can do? Hah! That's a trifle. I have a battalion of lawyers who will obtain all the licenses this boy needs first thing tomorrow. It'll do them good, actually, something to keep them busy and off the handball courts. A mere detail of paper-shuffling. Any more of these preposterous charges, lieutenant?"

Detective Lieutenant Miller just turns and stomps off through the mud. The captain says to one of the uniformed officers, "Release this man," and presto! my handcuffs are removed.

"Let's try this again," Mr. Foche says. He extends his hand and we shake. "Son, my name is Emil K. Foche, I'm president of Foche Industries, Limited, and I'm proud to shake the

hand of a genuine hero. It took real guts to infiltrate that drug ring all by yourself, real guts!"

As the manual recommends, I wax modest when presented with the praise due my dauntless efforts as a detecting agent. I say, "I am Warner Digby, sir, honor roll graduate of the Matchbook Detecting School of Yuma, Arizona, and this is merely a routine day's work. I do apologize for the destruction of your fence and your truck, Mr. Foche. Perhaps I could pay you for the damage? I could send you twenty dollars a week until the sum is covered."

"Hah! Boy, it was worth a dozen trucks for me to see old Mayor Pratt flattened in the mud by a Tarzan wearing a Foche Industries banner. Don't give it another thought. Twenty dollars a week? Hah!"

The tallest aide says to Mr. Foche, "Sir, the company photographer believes he got a good shot of the, er, collision involving Mr. Digby and Mayor Pratt. He'll know this evening after the film is developed."

Mr. Foche rubs his hands delightedly. "Wonderful! Have it enlarged to poster size and framed for my office wall. Then every time Mayor Pratt calls on me he'll have to see the banner of Foche Industries crashing down on top of him in the form of young Digby here. Wonderful! This is the most fun I've had

since the night I was mustered out of the army. I wouldn't have missed this for twin sisters in silk."

Mr. Foche says to me, "I like you, boy. Now, what can we do to reward you for your heroic actions?" The tall aide whispers in his ear. "Good idea, Sampson. Wonderful idea! Mr. Digby! You are a security professional. How would you like a contract to patrol the elite shopping mall that will be constructed adjacent to our convention center? It will be located right about," he points, "there, overlooking the water. I can assure you the terms of your contract will be liberal—after all, we have to take care of our heroes, don't we? Why don't you come up to the office tomorrow morning and we'll set it all up, along with your state license."

I am overwhelmed. I say, "Mr. Foche, your offer is remarkable but could we possibly reschedule the meeting for a subsequent date, as today is the first day of my honeymoon, you see, and my new bride is waiting for me as we speak, since when I departed from the Merchants & Seamen Hotel early this morning I did not know I was to be meeting my old friend Two-Toe Tucker for the first time and that my name was to be for a while Otto Wallik and that Two-Toe would cut me in on the sweetest deal I have ever

run into, resulting through my detecting skills in the collapse of a criminal empire that you have admired here today, and my bride is still expecting me to return with her breakfast consisting of one shrimp omelette and an orange slice garnish, pierced with a colorful beribboned toothpick."

Mr. Emil K. Foche gives a laugh, a deep, hearty belly laugh. "Your honeymoon! You left your honeymoon to capture these criminals? My gosh, boy, we've got to hurry!" Guffawing, he turns to the captain of police and commands, "Get this boy cleaned up and back to his bride, officer. Quickly now, not a moment to lose!"

Forthwith I am driven uptown to the police station, taken to the officers' locker room, and inserted in the showers where I wash off the mud. Upon drying myself I receive the loan of

fresh garments from a respectful police force.

It is sunset when a squad car drops me back at the Merchants & Seamen Hotel, and despite walking in my socks, my entry wakes up my beauteous but stork-like bride Olive, who has apparently slept all day and has thereby avoided any worry regarding my absence.

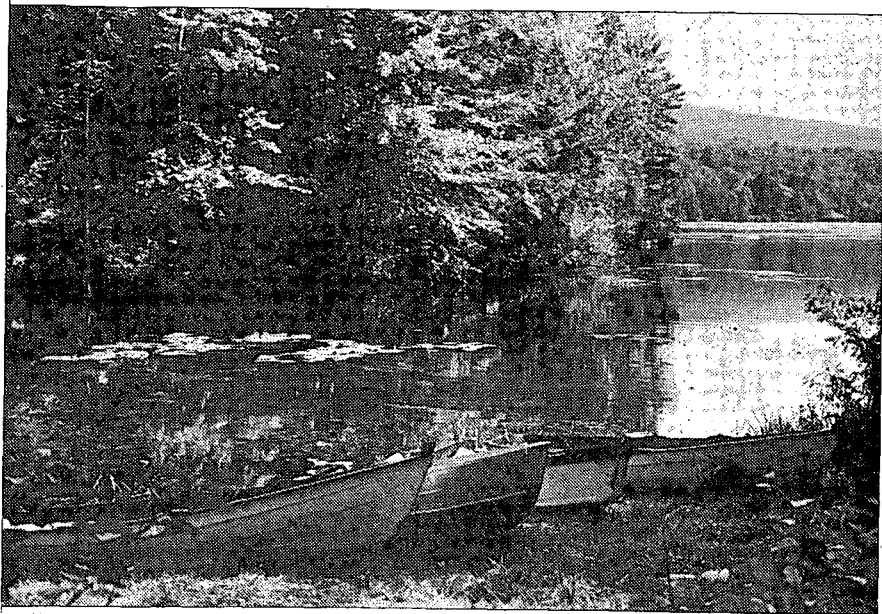
Olive looks up sleepily and asks, "What kind of omelette did you bring me, dearest love?"

I describe for her my exhilarative day and the promised chance with Foche Industries, Limited, which is its unexpected yet gratifying result.

"Uh-huh," she says, sleepily. "But where's my omelette, Warner?"

And although I look rapidly through *The Matchbook Detecting Agent's Pocket Manual*, I can form no cogent response to her query.

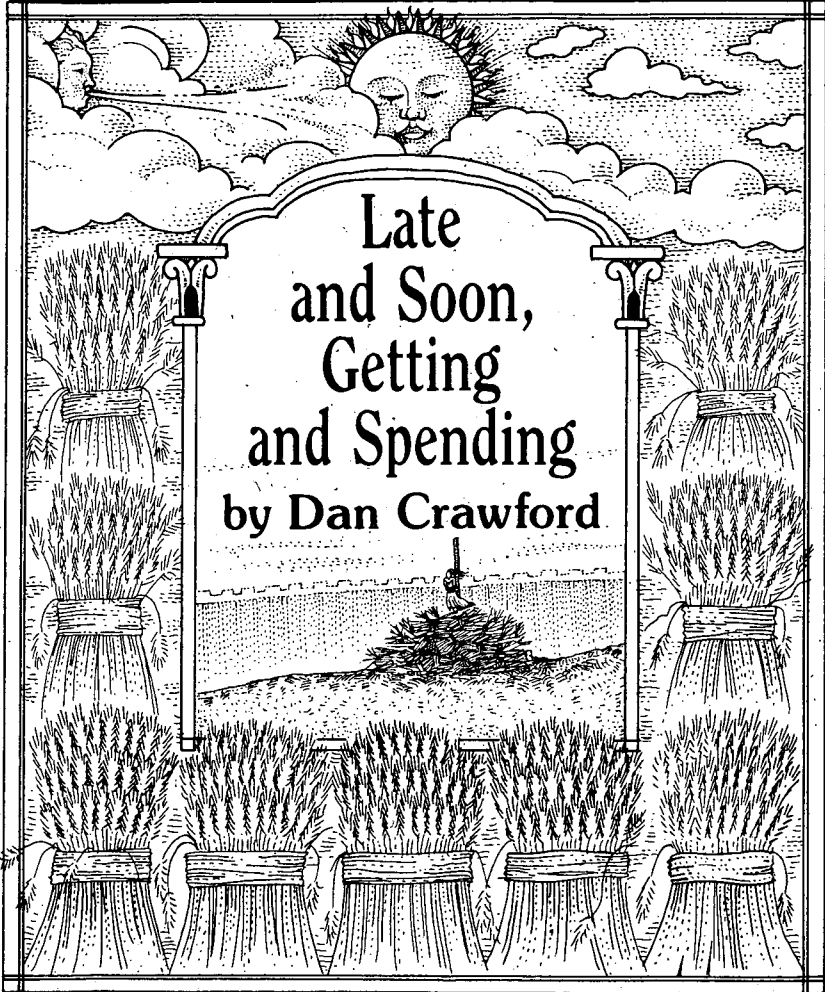
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Where's the quay? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 156.



Late and Soon, Getting and Spending by Dan Crawford

Polijn had figured out by the time she was four that begging for help was stupid. You were just letting people know you were in trouble. If you needed something, you reached out and took it if you had to, or else you paid for

it. And she was in no shape for taking things.

So she was reaching for her flute as she stumbled into the village. Squinting, she could make out three people standing in front of a little cottage. She took a deep breath, coughed,

and recited, through dry lips, "My name is Polijn, and although I look thin, I can sing, I can . . ."

The flute shook in her hands; she couldn't seem to bring it up to her mouth. She wrapped all her fingers over it, rather than let it fall. Jerking it to her chest, she upset her precarious balance, and sat down hard on the street.

There was a laugh and a shout. Polijn got one foot under herself, rose an inch, and sat down again.

Something hot brushed Polijn's cheek. She turned to see steam rising from a pewter cup. Somewhere behind the steam, a voice said, "Drink this. It's no time of year to have to travel." Polijn could see a thin, bloodless hand reaching for the cup, and realized it as one of her own hands. But she didn't see it touch the cup.

When she opened her eyes again, she was laid out flat, and someone was stripping her clothes off. She closed her eyes. It didn't really matter to her, at this point, what they had in mind.

"Look at this!" someone cried.

Polijn felt the ribbon pulled up over her head and opened her eyes again. The golden circle shone bright and clear through the surrounding haze. She could almost make out the hand holding the talisman.

"Here!" said a hoarse voice. "You take her legs. With any luck we can get her out in the street again before somebody notices."

"Da!" a higher voice exclaimed. "She can't go anywhere. Just look at her, why don't you?"

"Look at this!" The golden bauble bounced in the haze before Polijn's eyes. "She can't stay here; she must be a sorcerer. Whatever's wrong with her, it's probably some hellish spell. Her enemy's probably following her, and he'll be coming here. No?"

"Then we can hide her," the second voice replied. "We may need some sorcery ourselves this winter."

"Sorcerers are ungrateful types," growled the first voice. The talisman seemed to wink out of sight, and Polijn closed her eyes, not strong enough to bother to explain things.

Her fevered dreams brought her all manner of hot, dry deaths. Unreasonably, she woke up when someone spilled hot soup on her.

She could feel the rough cloth around the arm supporting her bare shoulders, and make out the ladle being brought to her lips. She did not resist, taking a sip. It was a thin soup, barley-flavored, but the heat seemed to pour through her, giving her enough strength to take a sec-

ond sip. Then she was lowered back onto her mattress.

Her first thought coherent enough to be called one was for her flute. She only had to turn her head a little to find it, shining brightly among her black and gray garments, folded on a little stool next to the bed.

She took four long breaths. "Don't fret," said a voice she recognized as the second one.

She looked up into a tight female face. "Where am I?" she rasped.

The woman's eyes were kind, and a little relieved. "This is Alen."

That meant nothing to Polijn. She closed her eyes.

Two days later, when she was strong enough for a more extended conversation, she learned that the woman was named Bournna. In the days that followed, she quickly picked up the names of the rest of the family. (This was a facet of her profession, after all.) The man who had suggested abandoning her in the street was called Old Da, more of a title than a name. He was as relieved as his granddaughter was disappointed to learn that she was no sorceress, but a minstrel.

"Ah, that's fine!" he said, clasping one of her hands. "How about giving us a song?"

"Da!" exclaimed two of his daughters and a grandson.

Polijn smiled. "A story,

maybe," she said. "I don't know how long my throat will hold up." She made sure it would hold up until the hero of the tale had been dragged underwater by the swamp monster. Then she rolled back into her pillow with an air of exhaustion only partially simulated. Let them wait for it. Leaving the story hanging might justify her bed space for a few more days, while she recovered her strength.

She continued the story the next evening, her voice suddenly giving out for another night when the dragon entered the picture. And, as the days went by, she found other ways to justify her bread and soup without overtaking her strength. She coaxed recalcitrant babies to their gruel, singing, "I like barley, barley you see." She displayed her repertoire for the neighbors, with not only songs and tales, but news and even travelogues. No one in Alen, it seemed, had even been much more than ten miles from the place, and they were agog at the thought of this frail, hollow-eyed woman walking miles through monster-haunted woods and war-torn plains.

"Tell us about your life," they'd implore, from Old Da down to Ponura, his great-granddaughter.

Polijn knew they didn't really

care about her hungry winters or sweating summers. Those were things they could have told about themselves. So instead she spun out adventures created on the spot, in which she did things that only she knew were inconsistent with her sense of self-preservation.

Naturally, they all wanted to know stories about the talisman, and she obliged. She had won it from a dead king in his ancient barrow, she told them, daring nightghasts and bony hands. She hinted that it had powers beyond imagination, if only one knew how to tap them. At Old Da's look of concern, she added smoothly that she had not yet gotten the hang of it.

Actually, the medallion had been handed to her by a sorcerer who called himself the Vielfrass, for reasons which were no doubt clear to him. He was at least half mad, and she suspected he was one of those people who did things first and thought of reasons for them later.

The talisman was gold, which certainly made it powerful, but it had only one property Polijn could not explain. She could not get rid of it. It constantly returned to her neck, no matter whether she gave it away, dropped it, or lost it to a thief. This was moderately annoying, since Polijn was not used to wearing jewelry and found the

weight around her neck galling, but the benefits far outweighed the disadvantages. That one bit of gold had paid for dozens of meals and many rooms at inns along the way. All she had to do was to be sure to be clear of town when the one-day period expired, and the medal popped into view around her throat again.

She had no need of gold in Alen. Old Da's family had taken her into their inner circle, and seemed to want to keep her there. After two weeks, Polijn knew them all, as well as most of their neighbors, and what they wanted to hear in a story. The young ones liked surprises, and sound effects. Heddar and Fayla liked battles. Da, who claimed to have once met Aquilon and Ambelon together, liked to hear about magic and sorcery, while Old Da, his father, preferred stories with round and unprincipled women in them.

There would not have been much for her gold to buy even if Polijn had been required to do so. It did not take a keen eye for her to realize that these people were hungry. Winter would be thin indeed, and Polijn was uncomfortably aware that Old Da and some of the children were borderline possibilities to survive the coming onslaught. This season was cruel in these northern lands, and only the

strongest could make it through on the tiny amounts of barley and bacon that seemed to form the diet here.

Polijn was suffering little discomfort, since she had very little appetite so far, and starving a bit in the winter was no novelty to her. But she had passed through this general area earlier in the year, and it had seemed to her then that there had been plenty of crops, and not just barley, either.

"Did the lands to the south here have a better harvest?" she asked Bournia one afternoon. She spoke hesitantly because farm words were not her words, and outsiders using inside jargon generally got laughed at, at best.

But the woman was pleased she'd taken an interest. "Oh, we had a good season," Bournia told her. "I don't remember a harvest so good since I was little. But the soldiers took the most of it. Da goes up there once a week to pick up our share."

She nodded toward the woods on the north edge of the village. Everyone in Alen seemed to do this same nod, almost unconsciously, generally adding some little profane gesture of acute annoyance, when they complained about anything in town. Polijn assumed the unseen soldiers must be camped beyond the forest, among the commandeered crops.

It was not an unusual situation. The group of tiny countries known as the Northern Quilt grew more armies than anything else. Farmers were always at risk. Either the crops were destroyed in skirmishes, or burned to cut off supplies from the enemy, or simply confiscated.

Polijn walked almost as far as the woods that afternoon, and thought she glimpsed, distant among the trees, the dark walls of the camp. She wasn't especially curious about the camp, but she needed the exercise. Her legs had to be under her so she could leave before snow fell. It would be no festival, spending the winter here on little more than barley soup. And the people had been good to her, had saved her life, really. She owed them, at least, the negative repayment of taking off, so as not to deplete their rations any further.

For if Polijn believed one got only what one paid for, she also believed in paying for what she got. She didn't know where this idea came from; she just knew it was there, strong inside her. Sometimes she tried to pretend it was a principle her master, Laisida, had taught her: leave no favors unpaid behind you; you may accidentally pass that way again.

But she knew the family expected little of her by way of

reimbursement: a song and a story in the evening, a hand with the children, and they'd likely give her part of everything, straight through the winter. Stupid clods! How dare they put her under so huge an obligation and then refuse to see it!

At night, lying awake and open-eyed among the children, she realized she must somehow find these people food. It wouldn't drop out of the sky, and she couldn't wave her talisman and make potatoes sprout. She had to go where there was food, and that meant the camp. Her golden bauble wouldn't help her there, either. She was still weak; maybe she wouldn't get away before the talisman came back to her. And soldiers could be touchy; they might take revenge on the village. At the very least, they could come and take the food back.

This left her with very little to swap. But there were currencies that would pass in almost any market.

Two days passed before she felt strong enough to try. That morning she pulled the hair back off her forehead and tied it up behind. She cinched in her belt as tight as she could, and brushed dog hair from her tunic. She had none of the lacy costumes her mother had used on the stage. She had to bargain

on a deep voice and big eyes.

"You're never leaving?" Bournna demanded, seeing Polijn pick up the flute and her other supplies.

Polijn waved an airy hand. "I just want to see if I can carry all this and walk, too," she said. "Build up my strength, you see." She was frightened at having to take a few extra breaths. Why was that deck of cards suddenly so heavy?

But she struck off jauntily enough. Bournna would worry, otherwise. "I'll just see if I'm surefooted enough to make it through the woods," she said.

"Don't go near the camp," the woman replied. It was automatic, the thing she always told any member of the family who left the cottage.

Polijn was panting, and shivering a little, as she stumbled among the roots and leaves to come out of the forest. It hadn't been that long a struggle; she could still make out Bournna mending clothes by the door of the house. But it had taxed her, and she put one arm around a tree as she looked over her destination.

It was an old camp. The stones of the wall were cracked and pitted, and dried weeds stuck out of the lowest rows. The little sentry booth at the gate was roofless and doorless, though it obviously hadn't been originally. The guard on duty was

whistling and studying a pair of squabbling crows flying over.

Wars were over for the year. The foes had hunkered down in forts sometimes less than a mile apart to watch this year's frontier. The landscape was punctuated by dreary little forts like this, in use at times, nearly deserted at others, as the frontier shifted.

They were all laid out much the same: Polijn had camped in some. There would be one square building, wooden, for the commander and his staff, three rectangular buildings, wooden, for the men on winter duty and their dependents, and one long building, stone, for the horses. Polijn always tried to sleep in the stone building; it was less drafty.

But it was too soon to think about sleeping. Polijn closed her eyes and counted to a hundred, to let a little more strength build up, and then lurched out onto the road.

The sentry was sitting down now, trying to hammer the heel a little tighter on his right boot, using a rock. "Morning, general!" called Polijn, in what she hoped was a hearty voice. "Is the Old Man seeing callers?"

The man looked up, interested and not unfriendly. "And what might your business be, girl?"

"To pay my respects," Polijn replied. She let her flute drop,

on the cord around her wrist, and gave it a little twirl to show what business she was in.

"Ah," said the sentry. He pointed his boot toward the gate. Polijn moved inside, walking as close to the sentry as she could without being too obvious, and was rewarded with a reassuring pat.

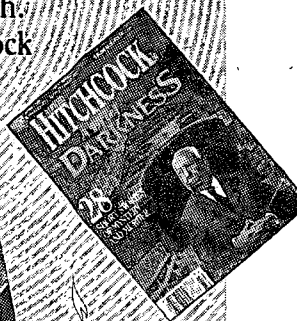
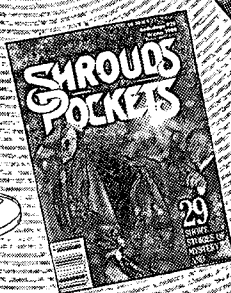
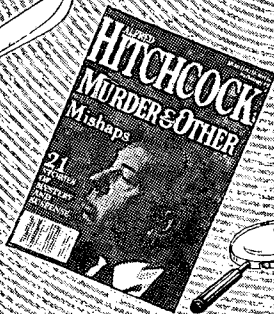
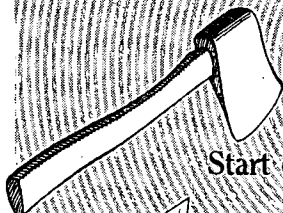
She found the square wooden building where she had expected it, and met there a lieutenant whom she carefully did not call general. Her tone was more respectful here, but she communicated the same message: that she was a passing minstrel making a social call. The lieutenant was impressed by her proper respect and deference, and said he would inform the captain, if she would like to step this way.

The room he left her in was sharp, spare, clean. There were no signs of prosperity, but its emptiness was less of poverty than of practicality: It was a room for defined uses and nothing irrelevant to those uses was permitted to clutter it.

"And check the levels in Bin B," a voice ordered. "And see to it that the cats are set out. Dovor says he heard more rustling last night."

The captain's head was nearly hairless; from this side, Polijn judged him to be getting on. This did not dismay her; in fact, she rather wished he were older.

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She had great luck cajoling ancients.

Then the captain turned to face her. Polijn took an involuntary step back. The face was thin, dry, humorless, with prominent bones and apathetic black eyes. It was like being confronted suddenly with a mirror.

"I am Prontaro of Boc," he said, his voice crisp. "Captain of the Prince's Second Western Company. Your name has been given to me as Polijn."

His eyes traveled over her, betraying no interest. Looking back, a little less openly, Polijn felt that her power to charm or seduce this hulk of chalk would be limited at best. He was the type who would react better to a direct attack. But she could see he wasn't the sort to give things away for less than full price. Well, this wouldn't be a bad place to spend the winter, if need be. A bit cheerless, perhaps.

"That is correct," she told him.

The face showed a little surprise at the low, hoarse voice, but not for long. "Who let you in?" he demanded.

Polijn described the shoeless sentry. The captain nodded. "What do you know of Vrojenn and his armies? He would be stationed south of here."

"Little enough," Polijn replied. "I passed through his do-

main three months ago, but his hospitality was not impressive and I came back by way of Alen."

"The hospitality is better there?" asked the captain.

Polijn spread out her hands, shaking a couple of crucial laces down her wrist where she could get at them. "I could bear to leave. It's a spare place, and short of food."

The captain smiled a little; it was a weary smile and Polijn didn't like the looks of it. "Is it, indeed?" he said.

Polijn shrugged. "I am beholden, however, to some of the people there, and wondered if you could spare some rations for them in return for my services." There was no sense in wasting time prettying up the request. She swung her flute up to playing position, giving the laces in her hand a quick tug to let her tunic fall open a bit. "I am available and at your command, whether you require a minstrel, a jester, a clerk, or just another woman."

The flute trilled. Then she glanced up at his face.

Silence blanketed the room. Two pairs of black eyes looked into each other. Then one pair came forward a little. "You're not from around here, are you," said the captain.

It was a statement, not a question. Polijn shook her head.

"Come with me," he ordered,

and marched around her to the door. Polijn came quickly behind him. She had no idea what he had in mind, but she felt instinctively what his attitude would be about someone who was slow in following orders.

He didn't even look back to see if she was coming until he stopped at a flight of stairs set into the wall of the compound. He stopped there, and stepped aside, waving her to go ahead. Polijn started up the stairs, pausing only to hike her shift up a little in back. It probably wouldn't do her a bit of good at this point, but there was no harm in trying.

The stairs went right up to the walkway around the top of the wall. Did he intend to throw her over, or hang her from the gatehouse tower? Surely commanders didn't do things like that. They ordered lackeys to do them. Polijn risked a glance back at Prontaro of Boc. His face didn't give her any clues.

The captain said nothing until they reached the southern wall of the outpost. "Here," he said, and pointed out over the wall that separated the walk from a twenty foot drop.

That was all very well for him, Polijn thought, stretching as far as she could on tiptoe to see over the wall. "Do you see that black building to the south?" the captain demanded.

"Yes, sir," she said.

"Vrojenn," he replied. "We could all walk to his winter camp in ten minutes. In spring, if we all live through the winter, we will. Now turn around."

She did so. Beneath them was an array of vast round wooden tubs. Three men on ladders were pulling the canvas roof off one, apparently with difficulty. Polijn could not have said, at this distance, what kind of grain had been hoarded in the tub, but she knew it was grain, at least.

"That's what we have to keep us alive through the winter."

It looked like plenty to Polijn. But the captain explained, "This is not overwhelmingly fertile land; it feeds the people here and gives them enough, in good years, to sell. This winter, however, the land has to feed the people who live on it, all my men, and, less than a mile away, Vrojenn's men as well. If we are careful, and pay out the grain in the proper amounts, we won't be overly uncomfortable. There will be some expendable casualties: the old, the sick. But that's a minimal price to pay. We have a little grain to spare, but none to waste, if the figures of my clerks are correct. Vrojenn, living farther from the village, has the luxury of not having to share with the inhabitants. It would be nice to think the people will remember this, come spring,

but very likely their allegiance will be to Vrojenn. They will remember only that he didn't keep them on starvation rations, forgetting that he never gave them anything at all."

He went on, and Polijn listened. She understood what he was saying, and she could see that Captain Prontaro had given the matter more thought than she would have expected. Where she came from, soldiers took without worrying about giving anything back.

But it was all irrelevant. Her concern was not that everyone should have enough, but that her rescuers should have a little more. "Enough" would not keep the whole family alive; "expendable casualties" would not do.

She looked away from the tubs of grain. The height was making her dizzy; not all of her strength had come back yet. She waited for the end of the captain's speech and then forced a smile.

"This is all very well, sir, but come. There must be something I can offer you that's worth a bag of flour or two." She tugged the laces to loosen the tunic a little further.

Prontaro of Boc looked a little disappointed, and exasperated as well. "And if I turn you away?" he demanded. "Or, better, make use of what you have to offer and then refuse

to honor the bargain?"

It was nice, anyway, to meet someone outside her hometown who wasn't mealymouthed. "Then I can repeat my offer down the line," she said. "There must be someone on your staff who can be trusted."

The captain's mouth pulled into a thin line, and he closed his eyes. Then the corners pulled up. "If you were someone from around here, I might take my chances. We will have a surplus of 'just another woman' here, particularly once winter begins in earnest. But we don't see many female minstrels; there might just be enough novelty in that to compromise my good and true and loyal subordinates."

He opened his eyes. "You say you can write?"

Polijn nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And since you have so many trades, no doubt you carry your own paper."

She had three sheets among her possessions, each rolled separately. She drew out the second largest one carefully, and the old broken scribble stick she packed for emergencies like this.

The captain raised both eyebrows. "Write this down," he said. "Any person not a resident of the Camp of the Second Western Company found guilty of exchanging services to a resident for food, without the prior

consent of the commander, shall be hanged, along with the guilty soldier. The bodies shall then be thrown to the wolves."

Polijn made a face, but put it all down.

The captain took the paper when she was done and looked it over. "I will have this proclaimed three times today, six times tomorrow, and at least once a day for the rest of the winter. You have nothing to offer more valuable than continued existence. And winter will soon be in full force, so if you intend to display yourself to every person you try to tempt, you'll likely die of pneumonia before you succeed. Come along."

Polijn sagged down the steps behind him, not so much depressed as weary. It had been days since she'd done this much walking without a rest. On the fifth step from the ground, her toes scraped along the stone, and she stumbled.

The captain, waiting for her below, caught her before she fell and lifted her to the ground. His face hardened in fury for a second, and he gave her a push to make up for his courtesy. Polijn hit the wall with one shoulder.

"Here," snarled Prontaro, reaching into a pouch on his belt. He took out a small wooden marker and flipped it to Polijn. "For your services as a clerk. Now be off. If I see you in this

camp again, I'll have you flayed for sausage casings. I doubt you could steal enough to make much trouble, but you're a bad example." He turned and stalked to his headquarters.

The family was overwhelmed when a weary Polijn returned later in the day, bringing the little bag containing two handfuls of oatmeal. "Ah, she's a wonder," said Old Da. "There's something in the tongue of a minstrel to loosen the tightest of fists."

Polijn just rubbed her shoulder and brooded. She was not such a fool as to have expected success on the first try, but the captain was a harder man than she had expected. This would set her back several days. First, she had to conserve her strength for the next try. Second, though Polijn had very little faith in laws or regulations, she knew that a brand new regulation was hard to fight. She would have to let it age a little, and weaken, before she tried to convince anyone to break it.

So she waited five days before sneaking back to the camp, and by late afternoon she was undressing in a dark, drafty shed, surrounded by saddles and harness to be mended. The sergeant of horse had a big nose and friendly eyes, and had promised her two pounds of barley for an entire evening's work. Polijn had no real idea how long

two pounds of barley would keep a family, but she had a suspicion the price was pretty cheap, even for her. Still, it had to help, and she was in too much of a hurry to bargain. After this, she would really have to start south. Those clouds were looking urgent.

She disrobed slowly. She was not overendowed by nature, so she had to reveal the basics skillfully. At home, she wouldn't have bothered to strip, but the sergeant had had his heart set on it. He didn't have to stare so intensely, though. What was going to come to view was bound to be a disappointment even in this minimal light. Polijn shivered. Why couldn't she have been one of those rosy plump things that rich men loved to toy with, all curls and dimples? They were useless little ornaments, but they didn't get hungry or cold, come winter.

The sergeant was not unfastening a thing. Well, maybe he didn't undress until spring, or maybe he wanted to get his barley's worth by watching her first. Polijn threw him an inviting smile.

He nodded back. "I'll just be checking this lock," he said. "It wouldn't do for anybody to come interrupting."

Polijn had her thumbs on her waistbands as the door swung open and Prontaro of Boc stalked in, accompanied by three lieu-

tenants and a couple of very heavyset soldiers. He nodded to the sergeant of horse, who turned away without looking back. Polijn sighed and picked up her clothes. When would she learn to recognize a trap? If only he had offered her more than two pounds of barley, she might have smelled that the deal was a little overripe.

If the captain was not surprised to see her, he was definitely furious. As Polijn shivered, he expressed his opinion of her intelligence, her ancestry, and the conduct of her life from birth on. He made several suggestions to the effect that hanging was far too easy a fate for her, and outlined numerous possible alternatives. Polijn did not reply, did not break down, did not beg. He was just in a rage, and if she kept quiet, he'd cool down all the sooner and settle for just hanging her.

"Take her to the cells," he finally ordered. "It's getting too dark for a hanging." He stabbed a finger at Polijn's face. "But nothing short of witchcraft can save you now, you fool."

They took her clothes away, but thoughtfully provided a blanket. Polijn had her suspicions, in fact, expectations, of what this would mean, but no one came near the cell. She wrapped herself in the worn woolen wrap and curled up in

a corner. Back home, a prisoner was never this lonely after being locked in for the night. Polijn didn't mind loneliness, but the traditional way had its advantages. It was warmer, for one thing, and why get a good night's rest just to be hanged in the morning?

She did not sleep, of course. It was just cold enough to keep her awake, without being cold enough to give her any hope of freezing to death before the rope took her. An occasional doze was the best she could manage, and she was roused from that by every hoot of owl or passing of the sentry on the wall beyond.

Coming out of the twelfth restless doze, Polijn heard a sound she could not immediately identify. She didn't move, and it came again: stone on stone, very close. She was moving her head ever so slightly when it was suddenly smothered in cloth. Rough hands held her arms and legs still; the blanket pulled off her and she was dragged against the floor.

Then she was tipped up and went headfirst down through the floor. Polijn refused to struggle. She didn't know where this might be leading, but it would hardly be a hanging. All she did was shake her head a little, to free her nose so she could breathe. One eye also seemed to be free of cloth, but

it was so dark wherever she was that this made no difference.

They had told her, in town, that the lands for miles around were riddled with spy tunnels and sapping tunnels from sieges of generations ago. So many wars had been fought in the borderlands that very likely dozens of tunnels lay forgotten, deep underground. This was a small one, because Polijn's captor was crouching, and not paved, to judge by the smell of dirt.

Her abductor tucked her against his stomach, holding her there with one arm, while he used the other to shift some door. Just a little of the moon showed through thick clouds, and the wind soon fixed that. Polijn went sprawling, a boot in her backside. She rolled against a tree. A bag caught her in the stomach.

She rolled out of reach in case he had more planned. But stone grated against stone again, and all Polijn got was a brief glimpse of a head as it vanished underground.

The wind slapped at her skin. She reached for the bag, and found her clothes inside. Shaking, aching, she pulled the heaviest of the outer garments free and slipped them on. Then, rubbing her backside, she got her bearings and limped back toward the village and a warm fireside.

"I still haven't got what I came for," she muttered. "I'll be back."

She was up early in the morning, before the soldiers could come and search the town. She was a little queasy, and every bone from head to heel begged for sleep. But there were things to be doing. Knowing some of the ways of the camp now, she waited among the trees until the sentry was relieved. This always involved a quick drink (or two) from the departing sentry in salute of the incoming sentry, and when the two men had pulled into a sheltered spot where the wind wouldn't buffet an upraised bottle, she slipped through the door and sprinted for the captain's office.

He was there. She had thought he had the look of an early riser. He seemed to be alone.

Acute distaste covered his face at the sight of his visitor. "What kind of fool are you?" he demanded.

"Well, sir," she said, "it's the nose. I recognized it, you see."

"Ah," he said, setting his right thumb and forefinger against the sharp triangle.

"And I was able to remember the spot in the forest where the tunnel left off," she went on. "You can kill me here and now, but I left word in the village. If I don't come back with food, they'll go straight to Vrojenn."

Still holding his nose, Pron-taro nodded. "Now, what shall I do about this?" he mused, looking falsely forlorn. "Do I block up the tunnel or burn the village? Or both? Decisions, decisions." Dark eyes turned toward Polijn; she thought she saw a little regret in them. "But you, my musical friend, are certainly doomed. As soon as news of your escape got out, rumor somehow declared that witchcraft was to blame; our cells are, of course, escape-proof. The rumors weren't hard to spread; everyone knows you carry a powerful talisman, and minstrels are always uncanny creatures. So you now stand convicted not only of breaking a military regulation, but of being a witch. And anyone who can use magic and is inclined to break laws is doubly dispensable. What you said about Vrojenn is useful, too; that makes you a spy."

Polijn could see him locking her into her doom as he spoke. But she had made her living by her mouth even before she became a minstrel. "If I know magic powerful enough to escape from your famous cell, what can you possibly do to me?"

The captain cocked his head to one side. "I've heard burning is good. And it makes a good show, especially at this time of year."

She licked her lips. "If I'm really that powerful, I could escape and take revenge."

Prontaro had a kind smile, really. "I'll take my chances on that," he said. He held out a hand. "But come now. If you were really so strong, you could have bypassed all this and increased the food supply by yourself."

"I suppose so," Polijn said.

Prontaro put two fingers across his lips. "In fact," he said, "that's an idea." He took the fingers away, and Polijn changed her mind about his smile. "We shall have a trial. You are a witch, of course; you proved that by escaping from the cell. But if you can prove your good will by increasing our stores, why, you will be allowed to live. Lieutenant!"

A thin, dark-haired man ran into the room. He stopped short on seeing Polijn. "My . . . your . . . sir, I swear I never saw her pass me!"

"How could you?" Prontaro said. "The young magician and I have come to an agreement about our differences. Have the men assemble in the storage area. Bring the town council from the village; the others will come along to see what's doing."

He smiled at Polijn. "And tell the sentry at the gate that he's assigned to carry, oh, twenty cords of firewood into the main courtyard."

It was windy up on the wall, and Polijn shivered, even though the sun had broken through the clouds to light the scene. She could see the camp graveyard from where she stood, too. Not that she would go there; her ashes would be scattered to the winds.

Prontaro of Boc had made his proclamation, and now it was all up to her. Soldiers and villagers watched her with interest; it was by far the best audience she had had in the Northern Quilt. If only she could think of what to do with it. She could oblige with a bit of song, perhaps, or make some kind of speech that would rally the villagers to a massacre. But she didn't think her voice would carry. The ordeal of the night had been too much of a setback in her condition.

That left her with only one trick up her sleeve, or, actually, under her shirt. She reached inside her tunic. Two guards on either side of her started forward.

The captain raised a hand. "No," he said. "Let her do what she has to."

Polijn did not take out a knife. The sun glittered on the Vielfrass's amulet and a gentle gasp of awe rose from the crowd. Polijn didn't have as much faith in it as that, but the little bauble had to have some power. She rubbed it a little on her

tunic and then stretched out her arm so that it glistened above the uncovered storage bin below. With her eyes closed, she tried to summon up any power within her and force it along her arm to the talisman. The sun beat down on her face; she tried to pull some of that energy in, as well.

It seemed like a year of silence. Then someone bellowed, "Look!"

Polijn obeyed. Opening her eyes, she saw a kind of a string of light extending from the amulet. For a moment, she was impressed herself. But then she remembered, years ago, seeing the Royal Tutor of Rossacotta give an exhibition to his noble pupils with a piece of crystal and a mirror in the sun's light.

She jerked her hand back and the beam broke. But a thread of smoke was rising already from the grain. She had nowhere to run as a guard cried, "The witch has set the grain on fire!"

A fist caught her on the left cheek. She rolled from the punch but landed heavily to make it look as though she'd been damaged. If you got up, she knew from experience, you got hit again.

"Never mind her!" roared the captain as the guards surrounded her. "Scatter the grain! Put out the fire before it builds!"

A mob of villagers and sol-

diers ran to the bins that would stave off starvation, arming themselves with shovels and boards and anything that could be used to spread the food. Bushels of grain went over the sides of the bins.

"You!" ordered Prontaro. "And you! Carry her to the stake!"

Another roar from the crowd made him turn. Screams of "Witchcraft!" echoed and men backed away from the bin as a great black hole opened up in the middle of the heaped grain. Fragments of jagged wood could be seen extending across the gap.

Prontaro all but jumped from the wall at the sight. Bellowing orders, he leaped down the stairs. "To arms!" he shouted. "This is not witchcraft! It's sabotage!"

Polijn was impressed. Somehow the man silenced the crowd, re-formed it into an army, and then sent it pouring down into the hole. She didn't get to watch for very long, though. Without any orders to the contrary, her guards decided to carry the witch away to the stake. Polijn was chained to a rough post, and firewood was skillfully arranged at her feet. Fortunately, no order had been given, so far, for the lighting of it.

A long, cold morning followed. Polijn had enough slack in the chains to be able to move to the leeward side of the stake

whenever the wind changed, but this didn't provide much shelter. Midday had passed before a lieutenant arrived and personally supervised the unchaining of "our witch." He then escorted her to a little room in the officers' building.

"The captain sends his regrets that he was unable to attend to you sooner," he said. "Is there anything I can get you, milady?"

Polijn was a little weak in the knees already, and being called "milady" nearly finished her off. "N-no," she said. "What happened?"

"Ah, it was axe work down in the tunnels, milady," said the lieutenant. "But they were completely surprised. Vrojenn got away, curse him, and some of his crew, but we've got men on their trail."

"Vrojenn dug this tunnel?" Polijn asked. "Up under the grain?"

The lieutenant nodded. "It's a good thing you didn't try to tell us," he said. "We'd never have believed you. Better to show us. The tunnel was an old one; it led from one camp to the other. When he cleaned it out and found it came up under a storage bin, he would steal a few bushels of the grain at a time, and raise the false bottom he had built. I don't know if he meant to starve us out, or if his men would have attacked us, at

last, through the passage. Perhaps he meant a little of both?" He looked to the witch for confirmation.

Polijn shrugged and sat down on the little bed. "You got the grain back?" she asked.

"We did," he told her, "and captured all of Vrojenn's stores as well. So if you'd care to eat something . . ."

Polijn waved him away. "I'm tired," she said, and rolled herself under the blankets.

That night some of the captured supplies were rather recklessly expended in a vast victory celebration. Soldiers and villagers mingled, and it was very fortunate that Prontaro of Boc had had the forethought to rescind all orders prohibiting too close an association between the two.

Bourna and Old Da and the rest of the family were by far the most popular people at the affair. Old Da was asked again and again to tell how he had recognized the witch's quality at first sight, and how her talisman had glittered through her very clothes, lighting up the interior of his cottage.

Late in the evening, Prontaro pulled the old man aside. "And where is the singer now?" he asked.

Old Da's lips drew in. "Polijn, then?" he said. "Our witch? We thought she was with you, my lord."

The captain looked around the yard, dark eyes picking out the features of every smiling face lit by the bonfires. Then he stepped inside to check among his officers, passing the hot wine up and down the table, roaring hilarious and totally incoherent comments to grinning women passing among them. But he was looking in the wrong place.

Outside the village, Polijn turned her head to the left to avoid the stiff breeze blowing into her face. She had waited just long enough to see the celebration begin, so as to have an ending to the story. There was

no way she could have stayed; they might have expected her to do a few more such tricks.

The thump of her feet as she pushed on along the road gave her a rhythm for the song. It might make a fine adventure tale, someday, though for now it would just be news. West; she had to remember to keep moving west. Too far south, she might find herself among Vro-jenn's supporters, and they wouldn't like the tale at all. Besides, as far as she could recall, the people to the west didn't grow any barley. She had had enough of barley to last her through two lifetimes.

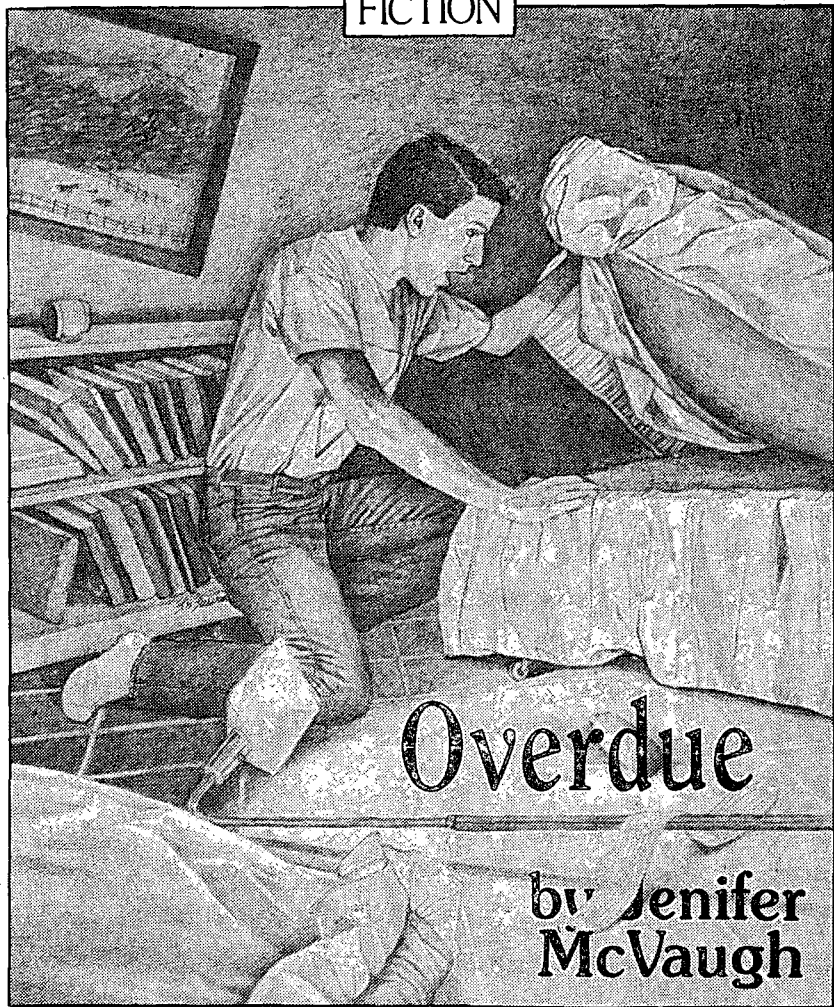
SPECIAL NOTICE TO READERS

The Winter Double Issue 1989 marked the beginning of a new development for you, the addition of double issues to our magazine's schedule.

As you know, AHMM comes to you every four weeks, or thirteen times a year. Your October 1990 issue will also be virtually double the size of a standard one, providing you with about twice as many stories. Another double issue will arrive, as last year, four weeks after the December 1990 issue, replacing the former Mid-December issue.

In 1991 we plan a June double issue instead of the October one. A Winter Double Issue will be published in 1991 also.

FICTION



Overdue

by Jennifer
McVaugh

“**A**ll right!” the boy exulted as he walked quickly along the familiar sidewalks. “All-darn-right!” His narrow shoulders were tensed, his dark eyes glittered with excitement. From his left hand dangled a plastic bag with a thirst-buster of pop and a red package of cigarettes. His sweaty right hand clutched a video cassette called *Bad Girls of Amsterdam*. A golden tightness paralyzed his chest, his skin tingled. He could

hardly believe it, even yet. Ten days of pop and cigarettes and adult videos, shoot, man, you might as well say it, ten days of sex and drugs!, and nobody in his way, the house to himself, stay up all night if he wanted to, practicing smoke rings and rewinding those Bad Girls; "do it again!" Yow-sah! he exclaimed to himself, breaking into a run.

The %\$#@! was gone! Gonzos! Gonnersville! He himself had put her on the train this noon. "Somebody with a little gray matter has to find a college for our boyo's next four years, and we know the kind of place he'd choose by himself," she had said, pinching his cheek playfully. "Am I right or am I right?" And that right there, ladies and gentlemen, was what he hated about that %\$#@!, because she was right, she was always right, that was exactly the kind of place he'd choose by himself, darn right he would, Party U, filled with pop and cigarettes and, you betcha, Bad Girls.

But he hadn't said anything, just watched as she bought her ticket to Philadelphia and settled her coat over one seat and her suitcase on another. Just, "Yes, ma'am," when she told him she would be looking for a place *that still knew right from wrong*, and "No, ma'am," when she warned that she wouldn't have the wool pulled over her eyes, and "Yes, ma'am," when she reminded him that the Watchbird would be watching his every move until she got back at the end of the month, and "Oh, no, ma'am! Absolutely, yes, ma'am!" when she suddenly remembered her library book and threatened to cancel her journey in order to return it until he promised on his Word of Honor as a Gentleman to retrieve from her nightstand and return to the library a large yellow book called *The Good Earth* the instant he got home from school, for she had never had an overdue book in her life, and she was bound and determined she never would.

"My word of honor as a gentleman! Shee!" He tucked the bad girls under his left arm and pretended to dribble the way he sometimes saw the black kids do. He bypassed the front door and went to the back, even attempting imaginary baskets once he was out of sight. "Shee! I take *The Good Earth* back tomorrow! Tomorrow plenty time." He moved his thin shoulders like a boxer. "Tonight I got me a date with some Bad Girls! Shee!" He burst through the back door chuckling and crowing, bobbing and weaving.

A large matron in a green polyester pantsuit was rinsing Swiss chard in the sink.

The boy stopped dead.

"Martin!" the woman greeted the boy.

"Mother!" the boy replied in dismay.

"I got to thinking about my library book and I could not stay on that train. I jumped off to phone you and it left without me. So is this what we call 'straight home from school' on a Thursday afternoon when there's nobody here to check?"

The boy said nothing.

"And I see we've been shopping!" She wiped a wide hand on her meaty thigh and held it out to take the white carrier bag.

He had to kill her. It was self-defense. Because she would have killed him if she ever would have seen what he had in that bag besides pop. When she grabbed the bag, he had to grab her neck and kick her legs out from under her and smash her head—hard—on the edge of the sink. Surprise was his one and only weapon. But it worked. And then he had to beat her to death, powerful, efficient blows to the neck and heart, because if she ever would have waked up after he hit her she would have killed him twice, no kidding.

When it was finished, the boy poured himself a tall glass of his cola, sucked it thirstily, and poured another. Then his legs began to tremble so he sat down. As the adrenaline drained from his body, a shameful red tide of remorse flooded in. Now what had he gone and done? He closed his eyes tight to keep from crying. "Oh, sheebers!" he said suddenly, lowering his forehead and rubbing it against his knuckles. "Sheech!"

He was sorry. He really was. But sheesh! Didn't he have to? Maybe she might have understood. Well, no, not that, never. But maybe she might have forgiven him. He would have been so sorry. He would have been crying. In fact he was crying now. He didn't mean for this to happen, but she *had* said she was going away. That was the only reason he brought the stuff home, he wouldn't have brought even the pop home if she was here. She knew that. Darn it! He didn't mean to do anything like this. It wasn't like he wanted to kill her.

Now everybody was going to think he wanted to kill her, and he didn't. Sure she was a "prickly customer," she said so herself. But he had his head screwed on the right way. He knew she only wanted what was best for him. He didn't want to kill her. Sheesh, he didn't even want to smoke the dumb cigarettes any more. He was really sorry, really, truly sorry. If he could wish the whole thing never to have happened, he would wish just that; him coming straight home from school, no white carrier bag, Mom in the kitchen washing vegetables.

And everybody would think he killed her, that he wanted to, when he didn't at all, it was more like an accident. She would understand. She knew how these things happened to him, she always knew he didn't mean to do whatever it was. And here she was, the only one who could understand and she was effing lying on the floor! So what the heck was he supposed to do?

Well, you can start by cleaning up this mess, young man, he said to himself. And immediately felt better. That's what she always said, and it meant the worst was over. Once she knew he was really sorry, she would treat him with a special gruff friendliness. "Let's see what we can salvage from this situation," she'd say.

The boy stood up and straightened his clothes. He poured the remains of the soda down the drain, he'd had enough sugar, thank you. The cigarettes went, unopened, into the garbage. He wrapped the plastic carrier bag tightly around the *Bad Girls of Amsterdam* and put the tape on the back of the kitchen table next to the fruit. He picked the Swiss chard out of the water, shook it and spread it on the tea towel on the counter, pulled the basket out of the drain and wiped the sink. Then he turned to the mess on the floor.

Actually it wasn't that much of a mess. She was in her sock feet, so there were no scuff marks or anything, she hated those scuff marks, you never got rid of them. She had a little bloody nose, and her neck was crooked, that's all. It occurred to the boy that she might be pretending, but he tickled her foot and she never moved so she was dead all right. Other than that she looked okay. By Jeez, he thought, maybe I can get it all cleaned up on my own before she even knows! Well, no, not her; she knew, obviously. Before somebody knows. Before the ess hits the fan. Get it all cleaned up and no one the wiser; well, why not?

He studied the body critically, then went to the back porch for the orange fiberglass tarpaulin. Everybody who knew his mom knew she was going to Philadelphia for ten days to look at colleges, a first-hand look was imperative if you didn't want the wool pulled over your eyes. So nobody would even be looking for her for a week plus a weekend. Which gave him at least ten days to come up with Plan B; "Mom decided to move to Trenton," "Mom met some people in Wilmington," "Mom's spending another month with a cousin in Seaside Park," whatever. Jeez. He'd think of something.

He folded the tarp lengthwise alongside his mother's body and propped her on her left side against his knee while he scrunched up the top half of the sheet under her. Then he tilted her on her right side, smoothed out the fabric beneath her, and laid her down

with her coat on top, like a blanket. He had learned this emergency stretcher at the Red Cross. Now he could drag her out of the kitchen. But where? Not outside, too many nosy neighbors. She could go to her room for now, but she couldn't stay there forever, and she'd likely just as soon not get moved twice. The basement was cool and private. And the root cellar in the basement had a dirt floor! Mom didn't really like going down in the basement, but maybe she'd get used to it. Har-de-har. All right! This was going to come together! Shee!

The boy bumped his travois down the basement stairs, through the furnace room, and into the root cellar behind. He moved a scattering of potatoes into one corner of their large corral. He used the garden spade to clear a shallow grave, then reconsidered and began slowly to dig it out much deeper.

He had been reacting like a kid, he realized, it was time to grow up fast. Okay, he had done a wrong. No question. And he regretted it, no argument there either. But it was up to him what happened next. The past was past, nothing would bring it back. Now the future, his and his mom's, was his to create. And she only wanted the best for him. He grunted with the effort of digging into the hard-packed earth beneath the eighteen inch layer of sand. It wasn't like he was a criminal, this whole thing was an accident. It would never happen again. He deserved a second chance. He would put her deep, deep down. Unpack the purse and the shoulder bag and return everything to its place. Call the train station to remind them that she had boarded the train. They'd remember her, she had made fun of the ticket taker about his accent. They wouldn't know she got off again. She hadn't left anything on the seat. The coat would get buried with her.

When this part was done he would go upstairs and phone the train station in Philadelphia. "My mother says she lost her"—what?—"glove on the train that got into Philadelphia at three thirty-eight. Did you find it?" Surely they would have found one glove, so they'd say yes, and that would prove she had gotten there. He was in the clear. Clearzos. Sometime in the next two weeks he'd go over there and send himself a telegram: "pack up and come to Trenton," or "I'm staying with Cousin Matilda in Seaside Park." All right!

The hole was deep enough. He dragged the bundle to the edge and maneuvered it in with difficulty. He wanted to put his mother in face up, but the bottom of the hole was four or five feet down, and he didn't want to bury the tarp, which went on the back porch.

Finally he realized his mom didn't give an ess-word which way she was facing and jerked the tarpaulin out. The body grunted when it hit; just gases.

The boy went into the furnace room and returned with the ash drawer. Ashes, he knew, contained lye and would prevent odor and eat away organic material. They used to put ashes in the outhouse at the cottage. The boy spread them carefully in an even layer over the body at the bottom of the grave, and then filled the hole in again, soil first and then sand, packing it down with both feet so as not to leave a lump.

As far as friends, he wasn't too worried, she didn't have any. She formed a low opinion of anybody she ever got to know, and she always told them why, so if she chose to keep to herself, well, nobody tried to stop her. She didn't have a job or volunteer or play cards, she kept house and raised a garden for work and read books and watched TV for kicks.

As far as money, that would be no problem either; by the terms of the trust fund the check was in his name every month, not hers. She hadn't liked it, but that's the way Dad wrote it and and there was nothing she could do. The boy always gave her the money anyway, once it was cashed, and she stuck it up in her desk, budgeted in little envelopes: the electricity, taxes, food, whatever. All written down in little books. He smoothed the earth with the garden fork and scattered the potatoes around again. All he had to do now was follow her routines. One thing you could say for her, she had her routines; she had them written down and she stuck to them, keep those routines going and nobody would ever miss her.

Every day, cook the meals, clean the house; no big deal. Twice a week mow the lawn and water the plants; those were his jobs anyway. Every Tuesday was garbage day. Every Saturday shop for groceries and give Martin his allowance. Sheech! Maybe he'd give himself a raise! Every two weeks, paper boy and library—

Uh-oh. *The Good Earth*. He smiled tightly as he returned the tools to their places, shook out the tarpaulin, and folded it into a compact square. Close one or what? He turned out the light and climbed the basement stairs, glad to shut the door behind him. Okay, he would put away the tarp, get the darn library book and put it with his schoolbooks for tomorrow, do his homework, take a shower and go to bed. Oh, and make that call. Oh, and watch that video, if he felt like it.

He took the shoulder bag and the purse upstairs into his mother's bedroom and put them in the closet, then went over to pick up the

library book from her nightstand. It wasn't there, so he bounced down the stairs to the front door; she must have set it out when she came home. But the table by the front door held only an empty candy dish. Nor was the book slotted between the bannister rails on the stairs above the table. Nor was it on top of the TV or lying on the couch, or on the mantel. Not in the living room.

Unless she took it back herself—no, she would have unpacked and changed shoes before she walked downtown. It was probably on the kitchen table, in fact he could remember seeing it there, come to think of it. Big yellow sucker. *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck. Just in case, he glanced around on his way through the dining room, but as he expected, the dining room table was bare and the large stoneware tureen stood alone on the shiny brown surface of the sideboard.

Sure enough there it was on the kitchen table—no! Sheep dip! He shook his head. That wasn't the darn library book, just the video next to the fruitbowl. Way to go, Mom! So where'd you put it? Not by the front door, not by the back door, not in her room. Way to go, Mom! She probably put it in *his* room because he was supposed to take it back. Brilliant. He scooted back up the stairs and opened the door to his room. Looked on the bureau by the door. Looked on his bed. Looked on his bedside table. Looked on his desk. Sheep dip! Which left the bathroom. On top of the washing machine. No. Next to the toilet; right, Mom, perfect place. You sit down and get up again and forget about your book. You nerd. But the library book was not next to the toilet, nor in fact anywhere in the small bathroom.

Which left her room, right where she left it, only she must not have left it on the nightstand, where any normal person would leave it, and where, ladies and gentlemen, she *said* she left it. She left it somewhere else. He reentered his mother's tidy bedroom and looked very carefully for *The Good Earth*, by Pearl S. Buck. He looked behind the nightstand, then in the nightstand, then under the nightstand, then under the bed beside the nightstand, but found no book. He sighted along the floor in every direction but saw nothing but a pair of furry slippers. He stood up and crossed to his mother's bureau. There was a silver tray, several jewelry boxes, a Japanese dancer, and an empty vase. His heart leapt when he spotted something large and light-colored behind the bureau, but it was a package of stockings. The desk was closed, nothing rested on its slanted surface. The bookcase behind it held no large yellow book, she wouldn't have put a library book in with her books any-

way. The top of the vanity held colored plastic jars and bottles and tubes. He opened the closet door but found only clothes hanging neatly and shoes on shoe trees, except for the bags he had put in earlier—that's where the thing was! She had slipped it in one of her bags. But neither the shoulder bag nor his mother's purse contained *The Good Earth*.

The little carriage clock on the mantelpiece downstairs chimed five. Sheech! The darn thing wasn't here. But he knew the answer to that: "Keep looking, it has to be somewhere. Can't find it! You mean you can't be bothered to look!" No, all right, he was looking, he'd look, he'd find it. Can't let her have her very first overdue book in the history of the world! The %\$#@!

All right. Systematic. Not on her bureau. Not on her bed. Not on the vanity. Not on the chair. Not on the desk. Not in the desk: he rooted through neat piles of papers but found nothing. Not on the bookcase. He began to pile books one by one onto the floor. Not in the bookcase. He stripped the pillows off the bed, but there was no yellow book under a pillow. Nor under the blankets. Nor under the sheets. He pulled the curtains back and looked on the windowsills. Nothing. The large drawers in the bureau yielded only underclothing and sweaters. The drawers in the vanity were too small; he pulled them out anyway and emptied them on her bed. Nothing but emery boards and a hot wax treatment. He opened the cupboard door and emptied every shoebox onto the bed, threw every dress and pantsuit on the closet floor. No G.D. book. Breathing deeply through his nose, he stood in the doorway and surveyed his mother's room. The book was not there.

Good. Fine. Excellent. Because that narrows it down, ladies and gentlemen. We can definitely eliminate one room. The book is somewhere. The book is not (where it should be, and where she said it would be) in her room. Therefore, the book is somewhere else. We shut this door, we continue looking in the other rooms, it has to be somewhere. It didn't grow legs and walk away. He gave his mother's bedroom one last searching look, just in case. He saw piles of clothing and shoes, an unmade bed, beauty creams, stacks of paperbacks and hardcovers and a bunch of desk junk, but there was absolutely no yellow library book, so he pulled the door firmly shut.

Hallway. Empty. Nothing. Zip. The runner had a lump in one place but there was nothing under it but another lump in the carpet liner, which he smoothed out. The bathroom was pretty easy; he looked in the medicine cupboard and felt around in the piles of

towels in the linen closet. He was about to leave when he thought about the laundry hamper and grubbed through there, but it held only dirty clothes, and the johnny brush holder had nothing in it but the johnny brush.

You're a jerk, man, he realized. She didn't stash her stupid book. She didn't hide it. You didn't even look downstairs, besides one really quick look. It's downstairs in some normal place. He opened the door to his room and just glanced in, but he was sure it wouldn't be there and it wasn't. He felt an urge to lie down for a second on his bed, but he didn't do it.

As he made his way down the stairs, his eyes scanned carefully, but in fact his mind's eye was already seeing the yellow book in the living room. In fact, he was pretty sure he remembered a large yellow book lying on the top of a pile of magazines on the coffee table in front of the picture window. It wasn't there. He looked on the sill of the picture window and the hot air register and on the floor. He looked behind the TV, and picked up the VCR to look between it and the TV. Not on the mantel. The fireplace was swept clean. He ran his hands carefully around the upholstery of the couch; he found several pennies and one dime, a pencil stub and three half peanuts but he didn't find *The Good Earth*. He sat in the La-Z-Boy and felt down into the cushions. Then he extended the chair to full recliner length and felt again. Then he looked under it, and then he probed the cloth protectors on the back and arms of the chair. Nothing.

Just to be sure, he checked the table at the foot of the stairs once more, but there was still nothing there but an empty dish. The boy dumped the coins and peanuts and pencil from his hand into the dish. Just to make sure, he went through the pile of magazines on the coffee table in front of the picture window one more time. But it still contained only magazines.

He dropped to hands and knees and put his head down sideways as if he were listening to the fitted carpet; in fact he was looking across it, the best view for finding something you dropped. His dad had taught him that. That was the two of them in a nutshell. He helped you find junk. She gave you %\$#@! for losing it. "Keep looking, it's got to be there someplace." He sighted in every direction but saw nothing. Keeping his head near the carpet he crawled into the dining room.

Here he saw nothing but legs; four big fat table legs in front of him surrounded by six groups of four chair legs, four legs on rollers to his left—the china cabinet—six legs to his right—the sideboard.

The carpet actually was quite interesting when you really looked at it; like a landscape. But there was no library book lying on the scratchy loops or hiding behind a wooden leg.

The boy stood up a little too quickly and had to steady himself against a chair. He pulled the chair out to check the seat. It's got to be somewhere, it didn't vanish into thin air. He pulled out all six chairs and pushed them in again. He went to the glass-fronted china cabinet and moved it away from the wall to look behind it. One cup crashed and tinkled. Shoot. He tried to be more careful when he pushed the cabinet back, but another cup swung and fell. Well, tough. He checked the windowsill behind the dining room table. He opened the doors of the sideboard and pulled out piles of placemats and tablecloths and threw them on the dining room table. He opened the cutlery boxes but found only the good silver and the carving set. It's got to be somewhere. If you don't see it, it's because you're not looking.

His eyes narrowed at the large white soup tureen sitting so smug on top of the sideboard. Just an innocent little ladle sticking out. "Oh, nothing else inside me! Just a little ladle." Suddenly he realized, with a blissful, hilariously funny sense of utter relief that his mom had dropped *The Good Earth* inside the soup tureen next to the ladle. Very funny, Mom. He lifted the heavy lid with a sense of anticlimax. But the library book was not there.

Because it's in the kitchen, man. Where else, dummy? There's as many places in the kitchen as in the whole rest of the house. She wouldn't put it in the dining room, man. She wouldn't put it in the soup tureen, what the heck's the matter with you? It's in the kitchen.

Sure enough. Where else? But it was not on the counter, although he moved the Swiss chard to look under the tea towel. Not on the table, next to or under or inside the bowl of apples. He thought he could remember slipping it into the white carrier bag along with the *Bad Girls of Amsterdam*, but it was not in the bag. It had to be somewhere! It was not on top of or behind or inside the refrigerator, although he checked the hydrator and the freezer. It was not on top of or behind or inside the stove. It wasn't in with the dishes, it wasn't behind the dishes. It wasn't in with the tea towels. It wasn't in the broom closet. He checked the back porch, refolding the orange tarpaulin, but the library book wasn't on the porch. She couldn't have taken it down in the basement! She hated the basement.

She might have put it in the garbage. Not on purpose, by mistake.

In all the excitement. Accidents do happen. She meant to be throwing something else away and the library book got in with it. He pulled the garbage container out from under the sink. The folds of plastic were clumsy so he upended the bag on the linoleum. There was a large yellow box from a frozen pie, but there was no large yellow book. Futch! Sheek!

The G.D. book had to be somewhere. It didn't just grow legs and walk away. All he had to do was keep looking. It's bound to turn up. It's always in the last place you look. Had he looked everywhere? Then look again, and carefully this time.

He swept the contents of every cupboard onto the floor with the emptied garbage. He pulled all the food out of the refrigerator and threw it on the pile, along with the mop and broom and dustpan from the broom closet. He added the tea towels and dishcloths, and the drawer they had been in. He added the cleaning supplies from under the sink. That about took care of it, but he piled on the Swiss chard, the fruitbowl, and the *Bad Girls of Amsterdam* just to be sure. The kitchen was clean.

He picked up the carving knife from the top of the dining room table and sharpened it on its matching stone before he walked into the living room and pulled the cushions off the couch and slit them open. He shredded the upholstery on the arms on the couch and the La-Z-Boy. He ripped the curtains from the window and threw them into the middle of the room. Dining room and living room were clean. He climbed the stairs and walked the length of the hall.

In his mother's room he slashed both pillows and shook out the foam pellets before he dropped the pillow slips. He dumped the bedclothes, the bottles, the underwear, and the shoes on the floor. Nice mess, Mom. Now he slashed the naked mattress across several times, then turned it over and slashed it again. It occurred to him that *The Good Earth* could have been tucked between his mother's mattress and her bedspring, but it was not. He used the bone-handled carving knife to slash the sheer drapes where they hung in her window. That left her clothes. They were in a heap on the floor and he wanted to make sure he checked each one, so as he slashed each jacket and trouser combination and each dress he hung it up again. Until every strip was on a hanger, hanging neatly in the closet. And no library book.

And two stupid goddamn son of a whore bags on the closet floor! Of course! The goddamn book was in one of the bags; she didn't leave it by her bed, she picked it up and took it with her! Sure, he

had glanced inside, but those bags had all kinds of pockets and compartments, the book was inside the goddamn purse. He pulled the purse open and searched it carefully, section by section, but the book wasn't inside.

Well, then, it was inside the shoulder bag. Because then there was nowhere else. The boy took a deep breath, and opened the shoulder bag gently. Be in here, o precious book. Thank you for being in here, thank you for appearing, large and yellow, to me as I undo your most holy shoulder bag, he addressed the book. But *The Good Earth* wasn't there.

Which meant just one thing. She still had it. Somewhere hidden in the lining of her coat, or stuffed into a fold of her suit, stuck down her bra or tucked in her waist, clutched under her arm, or clenched between her legs. He picked up the knife. The blade was nicked in one place but it was still sharp enough. Not to dig, he wasn't crazy. But to hold at her throat—where is it? *Eh? Bitch?* And then if she wouldn't tell him, well, his blade would find it. Wherever it was.

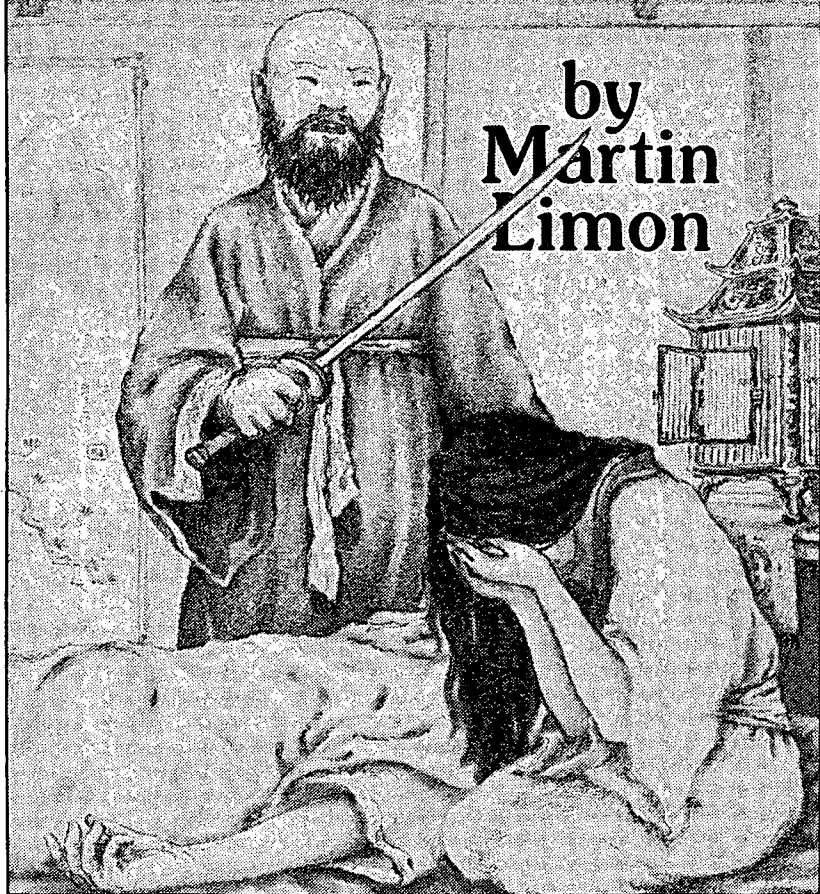
The boy pushed the hair back from his forehead. His hand shook slightly as he grabbed for the bannister. He was all right, though, just his feet felt very heavy. As he rounded the bend of the stairs he heard loud hammering at the front door; when he peered through the frosted glass panel he could make out blue uniform trousers and a peaked cap. Good. Right on. A little muscle. If the knife didn't make her talk, she could see how she liked the third degree down at the station. "You are charged with failure to return by Pearl S. Buck, and harboring contempt and refusing to yield. If you cannot afford legal counsel anything you say can and will be used against you." He straightened his shoulders and went to answer the door.

Larry Deacon shifted the heavy bag on his back. He heard the clumping inside and knocked again, a little louder. If she had to come up from the back of the house, so be it. She had given him enough grief about "rules are rules"; he was looking forward to giving a little back. Imagine sticking a book on top of your mailbox for the letter carrier to hump downtown! With nothing more than a twenty-two-cent stamp and a note: "please and thank you." He'd "please and thank you" her, and no mistake. It was going to be a pleasure to have the last word with her for once, that %\$#@!.

FICTION

A Coffin of Rice

by
Martin
Limon



The scream from the King's quarters smashed through the inner sanctum of the Secret Garden and brought Chin Ga So, Chief of the Royal Guard, to a rigid sitting position amidst the jumble of his sweat-soaked blankets.

His stomach tightened like a fist preparing for battle. "It didn't work," he thought.

He rose and slipped on a full-length silk robe, richly embroidered with warring dragons and the portentous symbols of long-dead astrologers. He strapped on his sword and in a reflex movement pulled it slightly out of the scabbard and let it drop back into its finely honed position. When he slid back the door of his room, the Royal Food Taster was already there.

Cowering on all fours, he repeatedly bounced his forehead on the carefully raked gravel of the courtyard.

"They should have both eaten," he said. The words almost choked out of his throat. "I can't understand why she is alive."

"Silence!" Chin roared. He slipped on his sandals, stepped down into the courtyard, and stomped his foot down on the Food Taster's head.

Chin bent slightly forward and said it softly. "You vile issue of dog leavings." He rotated his foot and ground the Food Taster's head into the dirt. "If they are not both dead, you will soon wish that your ancestors had fornicated only with the sterile corpses of beasts."

He kicked his foot forward and the Food Taster rolled over in the dust until he lay on his back with both arms and legs held up in the air like a supplicant canine.

Chin Ga So turned and strode toward the source of the scream.

The fragrant paths of the Secret Garden were interspersed with brightly colored pavilions and resplendent Royal Guards who came to attention and barked out a martial greeting as Chin passed. He came to a small lake that was in the center of the Secret Garden which was in the center of Kyongju, the capital of the Kingdom of Silla.

Only the sound of softly singing birds wafted across the placid, lily pad-filled waters. At the base of a small footbridge two soldiers, armed with pikes and swords, stood guard.

"Has anyone passed this way since I left you early this evening?"

"No one, sir." The young guards trembled.

Chin Ga So got up close to the guard who had spoken until he could see the beads of moisture forming around his wispy mustache.

"You will die very slowly," he said, "if you are lying to me."

The guard swallowed hard. "No one has passed tonight, sir."

Chin stepped back and looked at the other guards standing at attention around the small lake. "Has anyone crossed the lake tonight?" he yelled.

They sounded off in unison. "No one, sir!"

He crossed the bridge quickly and unsheathed his sword.

The building was not large but exquisitely made with hand-carved and brightly colored rafters and elegant upturned shingles on the roof. Small figurines of monkeys vigilantly straddled the shingles, guarding against evil spirits. Chin chuckled at the failure of the simian protectors to do their work today.

The Chief of the Royal Guard didn't charge into the building right away but instead walked completely around the small island. In the dim light of the dawn he checked carefully for any footprints in the neatly raked sand.

There were none.

He stepped up on the lacquered wooden porch, took off his sandals, and used his key to unlock and then slide back the wood paneled entranceway. He entered and closed the door behind him.

The quarters were just large enough for the King and a few privileged concubines that he chose to favor with his attentions. Chin stepped softly across the heated floor toward the soft whimpering coming from the bedchamber of the Great King.

Lady Ahn sat on the wrinkled sleeping mats and bedcovers holding her face in her hands and crying softly.

The Great King of Silla, dressed only in his white linen bedclothes, lay face down on the mat. Chin Ga So kneeled and turned him over. A skein of twine rope was fastened around his neck, still biting hard into his constricted flesh. His eyes bulged and his tongue stuck out to one side of his mouth, as if he had made a last, mad face at his tormentor.

"What have you done, woman?" Chin yelled.

Lady Ahn threw her long shimmering black hair back and lifted her face to his. "I have done nothing!" she said. Small bits of solid black coal burned inside her eyes. A large purple welt stood out on her forehead, obscenely mocking the unblemished purity of her skin. "I must have been knocked unconscious. And when I awoke . . ." She looked over at the King.

Chin checked for the food. The intricately designed tray and the elegant chinaware remained untouched.

"You didn't eat?"

"No. We weren't hungry."

Chin realized that except for the concubine's whimpering, the King's chamber had been unusually silent. The cheerful chirping of the King's pet bird, a colorful yet vile creature from some far off uncivilized land, was absent. The small but ornate birdcage was empty, and the little door had been left ajar.

"Did he let the bird out?"

"Yes. He often let him out to play."

"Wasn't he afraid he would escape?"

"No. All the windows and doors were closed."

"Where is the bird now?"

Lady Ahn looked around, puzzled. "I don't know. When we went to sleep he was still flitting about amongst the rafters."

Then someone had entered, Chin thought. "And your forehead?"

"It was the middle of the night." The lady lifted a delicate back hand to her forehead. "Someone grabbed me, and before I could react in any way, he rammed me against the post." She waved her free hand in the direction of the elaborately carved and decorated supporting beam in the center of the room.

Outside, the courtiers, servants, and the curious, who seemed to arise out of the shadows of the Secret Garden, were gathered along the shore in gawking, murmuring clusters.

"Clear them," Chin Ga So ordered and they were cleared.

He allowed no one to cross over to the island. Even the Royal Morticians were forced to wait impatiently on the shore. One by one Chin questioned the two dozen guards who had stood sentry around the lake during the night. Some of them had heard nothing, but a few reported hearing a soft thud in the night sometime after the Hour of the Rat. They had thought nothing of it and had not even bothered to report it, since the King was known to make even more rollicking reverberations during his nightly assignations.

The Royal Alchemist and the Royal Architect were summoned, and they searched the building for the means of surreptitious entry. Chin personally led Lady Ahn across the bridge to her entourage of ladies-in-waiting. She held onto him for balance as she walked and with her free hand held her stomach and looked very pale. A series of gruff and incongruous belches emanated from the lady's slim body, and Chin thought of how upset she must be, but in the fashion of the cultured people of Silla he ignored the impolitic bodily intrusions.

The sliding windows had all been latched and sealed for the night by the Royal Keeper of the Keys, and in any case if someone had approached a window he would have left footprints in the sand and the guards would have seen him easily. The white, lightly oiled paper that filled the window frame was unblemished and unbroken.

The Alchemist came up with a concoction of various powders and started a fire in the central heating system at the outside base of the building that sent red smoke billowing through the underground heating ducts. No smoke came up into the building but as expected ran through the heating ducts, warming the masonry below the highly polished wooden slat floors, and then escaped through the chimney on the opposite side of the building.

The heating system was working fine and allowed no entrance into the building. And from within the building there was no entrance to the heating flues or the chimney that might have provided the bird an escape.

Under Chin's close supervision the Architect checked the walls and the rafters. Each beam and wooden slat was handcarved and fitted perfectly into the grooves of another, making a strong and self-contained structure. No nails could be used in the construction of any residence of the King. His safety was paramount.

There was no way for the bird to have escaped, but somehow it had. And if it hadn't been for that incontrovertible fact, the fact that gave credence to Lady Ahn's assertion that someone had entered the building during the night, Chin Ga So would have been certain that Lady Ahn had herself killed the King.

She certainly had good reason to. Chin kept a dossier on all the King's concubines and knew well her background. She was from a poor farming family in the southern Kingdom of Paekche that had been robbed of their lands when the armies of Silla invaded and conquered some of their northern provinces. Paekche's land holdings were sizeably reduced, but they, along with the northern Kingdom of Koguryo which also shared this rich peninsula of Asia, were constantly plotting to overthrow the exalted Lord of Silla.

She was also known to be athletic and strong, having actually worked for a while in her childhood as a common farm laborer. As she grew older her family realized the much greater value of her incomparable beauty, and she was sold to the Royal Court.

The piece of twine that Chin had found around the King's neck was just slightly longer than the length of both his outstretched hands; from small finger to thumb, from thumb to small finger.

The same size, he knew from experience, as Lady Ahn's willow-like waist.

But the escaped bird proved that Lady Ahn's story was true and that someone had indeed invaded the inner sanctum of the King's chambers and killed him in his sleep. Chin's thorough investigation was making it apparent to everyone in court that the only means of access would have been through the front door. Besides Chin, only the Royal Keeper of the Keys could provide that access.

But as to the number of powerful people in court who could coerce the Keeper of the Keys into doing their bidding—that number was limitless.

Chin rubbed his hands together and couldn't stop a rivulet of spittle from escaping onto his long gray beard.

He ordered the Keeper of the Keys tortured.

He also instructed the Royal Truth Seeker to be careful with him and not to take his confession until later. Chin would decide who, from amongst his enemies at court, he would accuse as the accomplice in the King's murder.

One of the scullery maids approached Chin Ga So, bowed deeply, and requested permission to clean the King's room. Chin nodded absently, thinking about his enemies at court, and thinking about how his plot to murder the King had been usurped by someone else.

Another assassin.

Maybe someone more ruthless than he.

The old woman carried the food tray out, rattling the chinaware in her nervousness. Walking slowly and still stroking his long gray beard, Chin Ga So followed her across the footbridge and into the washroom behind the King's kitchen.

The scrubwomen and cooks gasped in astonishment when he entered.

"Put down that tray!" he bellowed.

The woman dropped it clattering to the wash counter and clutched her stomach, backing up and bowing like a foraging hen.

"All of you, out!" The workers tumbled over themselves getting out of the room. "Except for you." He pointed at the maid who had carried the tray. He recognized her from somewhere.

"You're from Paekche, aren't you?"

The woman's skin went as white as one of the plucked ducks hanging by their webbed feet along the back wall.

"You are Lady Ahn's personal servant." It wasn't a question. Chin remembered her now.

He turned to the tray and lifted some of the porcelain lids that covered the various bowls and dishes. There was bean curd with shoots of green onions in a red sauce, a delicately flavored bean-sprout soup, and, of course, two bowls of rice.

The glutinous white rice was packed evenly into the bowls, the surfaces perfectly symmetrical and rounded as if they had been pressed down with the curved contours of a very large spoon.

Not one grain was out of place.

A food presentation fit for a king.

Lovely and unblemished, the rice had been laced with the strongest poison known to civilized man.

If he allowed the greedy servants to eat it, they would all die. Worse, his plot would be revealed, and he and the Royal Food Taster would suffer a painful and ignominious death.

Chin fumbled with the food. He didn't throw it into the garbage, the servants would just sell it later to the poor people of Kyongju, but into the night soil container, so as to fertilize the rich fields of the Kingdom of Silla.

It was when he turned over the second bowl of rice that he saw the small, crushed body.

The bird.

Then he heard the scream.

When he got to her quarters, the ladies-in-waiting were running about and crying, and the Royal Physician was already being summoned to the scene.

Shin, the Royal Food Taster, caught Chin at the entrance to Lady Ahn's small compound and dragged him by the elbow off into the shadows of the Secret Garden.

"She must have eaten some of the food," he said. "Blood is seeping from her eyes and her nose, just as it would from my poison."

"But it took so long," Chin said.

"Maybe she ate very little. She is known," Shin said, "to eat little more than a bird."

Chin stroked his long gray beard for a moment, looked up suddenly at Shin, the Royal Food Taster, and then burst into uproarious laughter.

Lady Ahn must have hidden the remains of the crushed bird under the unblemished rice in hopes of fooling any investigator into believing that someone had entered the room. To make space enough for it, she had been forced to eat some of the poisoned rice, put the bird in the bottom of the bowl, and then make it look as if the food had not been touched.

Afterwards she rammed her head into the post to complete the facade.

She must have known that someone with the key to the front door, and the loyalty of the guards—through threat or bribery—would have been able to enter the chamber. That could be any number of powerful people at court, and after the death of the King, those in nominal but temporary power would seize upon their chance to root out their enemies and thereby improve their position at court.

After realizing the possibilities for gain, any rational investigator would not probe too deeply into the death of the King.

She hadn't counted on the obstinacy of Chin Ga So—or the poisoned rice.

He would have the scullery maid killed, Chin thought, for some trivial offense, and then the only person in the world besides himself who would have knowledge of the plot would be Shin the Royal Food Taster.

"Maybe she ate only enough," Chin said, laughing and slapping Shin on the back, "to hollow out a coffin for a bird. A coffin of rice!"

He laughed and laughed until slowly Shin's wrinkled face began to relax and his eyes got very wide and then he began to laugh, too. They were doubled over and almost crying in their mirth and so glad to have had someone do their dirty work for them and then slowly Chin Ga So stood up, wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and as quick as a white crane darting for a fish, he pulled out his shimmering metal sword and decapitated Shin the Royal Food Taster.

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UNSOLVED

by Guy Savant

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the July issue.

Slick the Pickpocket is on the loose again. Just yesterday he picked "pocket" bread from the baker down the street as well as other goodies from four other victims. From the following clues can you figure out which is whose livelihood, where each man had his pocket picked, and the order in which Slick picked them?

And then can you tell what Slick picked from the other four victims' pockets?

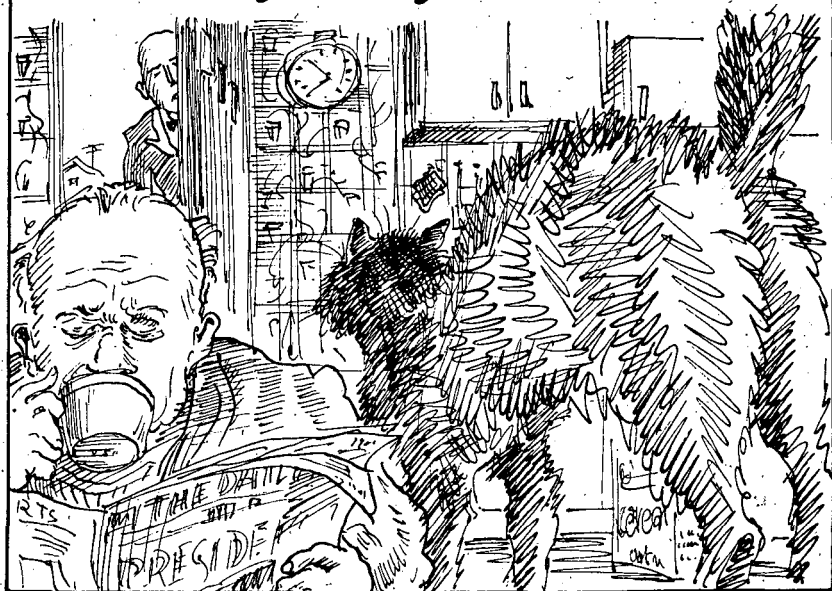
1. None of the victims was robbed in his familiar haunt.
2. Jack was robbed before anyone, though not long before Slick picked his next pocket on the Capitol steps.
3. The Boy Scout wasn't one of the first two victims and came closer than Jason to almost catching Slick.
4. Jason, Jim, and John were all within a block of one another, all of them far from the library. And the last man Slick stole from was clear out of town at a campfire.
5. The pool hustler wasn't at the Capitol, nor was he within a block of anyone else. The author was just down the street from the pool hall.
6. Jason was robbed just after John. Slick's victim at the bakery was immediately followed by the politician. The poor fellow at the pool hall was Slick's third victim.
7. John is not the Boy Scout. Jerry's was the easiest pocket picked.
8. The author and the politician were not robbed sequentially.

See page 150 for the solution to the May puzzle.

FICTION

Repeat Business

by Terry Black



Salvatore "Knuckles" Dermicelli awoke to the sound of a yowling cat.

Bleary-eyed, he got out of bed, donned his bathrobe, threw the front door open. With a scrabble of claws on linoleum, Pesto darted between his ankles and scurried for the kitchen. Knuckles leaned out, grabbed the morning paper, took the nickel-plated .45 from his bathrobe pocket, and plugged the fungus-faced zombie shambling up the driveway.

"God, I hate Mondays," he said.

He went into the kitchen, put some coffee on, sat down to read the paper. The headlines held no surprises. Someone had left a Schwinn-bomb in the bike rack outside Sears; the controversial new sex tax had narrowly cleared the Senate; researchers had discovered a new form of AIDS, transmitted only in the presence of a chaperone.

Knuckles had to turn through half the paper to find any mention of the three roving corpses he'd mowed down yesterday. The only reference was an oblique one:

MORTICIANS PROTEST REDUNDANT FUNERALS

by Dennis Pike, *Times Staff Writer*

Pittsburgh—In a sharply worded statement at a press conference today, Morticians spokesman Donald Longtooth complained about the frustrating chore of having to bury the same corpses over again.

"It's an outrage," he said. "Just yesterday we had to re-bury three bootleg deaders, found murdered—if that's the word—miles from their supposedly final resting places. We had to put 'em back in the ground, reconsecrate the soil, everything. But the next-of-kin don't pay those expenses—we do."

Longtooth called for stricter policing of graveyards and body banks. . . .

Pesto was bitching again, impatient for his Kal Kan. Knuckles opened a can, glopped some into a bowl, and stuck it under the feline's nose. Today's zombie was, what, the twelfth—no, the thirteenth—of Knuckles' ex-targets to bedevil him. *Dammit*, he thought, *don't they know I'm retired?*

Wearily he straightened up, wincing at the pain in his leg. It wasn't enough that the dead bodies of everyone he'd ever stuffed for the mob were climbing out of their graves to pester him. No, on top of that, his bursitis had to start acting up.

Welcome to paradise, he thought bitterly.

"Try to stay off it," said Doc Tisdale, examining Knuckles' knee. "Cortisone injections will ease the pain, but it won't get any better if you keep running around like someone half your age."

"I had some . . . ah . . . unexpected business," said Knuckles, thinking of Fungus-Face and his undead cohorts. "Besides, doc, I hate this 'life of leisure' crap. I go stir-crazy sittin' around the house."

"Just be glad you made it to retirement age," Tisdale pointed out. "Most fellas in your line of work wind up feeding guppies in the Monongahela, or dumped in a gulch for some not-so-sanitary landfill."

Tisdale wrapped an Ace bandage around the ailing knee. He wasn't really a doctor, of course; the mob physician had been bounced from med school after an incident involving the dean's daughter and a doctored cocktail at the local frat house. But Tisdale had a knack for seat-of-the-pants first aid, and he wasn't fussy about reporting gunshot wounds.

Knuckles longed for the glory days, a time of raw flesh wounds and frantic backroom surgery. The current spate of geriatric disorders was a blow to his self-esteem; he hadn't been shot at since the Tortellini hit, back in—Christ, was it twenty years ago?

Those had been good days, happy days; trading bullets with rival gangs, garroting squealers—one on the steps of the courthouse!—and generally raising nine kinds of hell as Knuckles deftly bum's-rushed his "clients" into the afterlife.

Not that any of 'em stayed there.

About a month ago, the first of Knuckles' old pals had eased himself out of a shallow grave in Aliquippa and tottered west, seeking revenge. Knuckles had caved in its skull with a tire iron. It wasn't supernatural; the zombie was stuffed with hydraulic joints and servomotors, with an on-board computer in the braincase.

Someone had turned the slumbering corpse into a sleepwalking "deader"—but who? And why?

Since then there'd been a dozen more. They weren't dangerous; the marching corpses were so clumsy almost anything would kill them again. Maybe the resurrector (whoever he was) was unskilled at reopening death's door. But the list of revivable candidates was daunting; Knuckles had been good at his job.

Suddenly he was tired of the whole business. He longed for the days when victims, once murdered, left you the hell alone.

"Pining for the old days?" asked Tisdale, breaking into his reverie.

"Yeah, I guess." Knuckles sighed. "It used to be so simple—no muss, no fuss. You whacked someone and that was that. End of story."

"Those were the days," Tisdale agreed. "Remember the time you gave Gus Lucatelli his wife's head in a hatbox? Nice touch, getting the hair permed."

"Hell, that was nothin'," said Knuckles, warming to the subject. "How about when I bumped that guy in California, the fella with the wooden leg? Remember how I gave him an eyepatch and left him in the Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disneyland? Two weeks he went unnoticed." Knuckles slapped his knee, wincing as he did.

Further reminiscing was cut short when a phone rang in the outer office. Tisdale excused himself and hustled away, closing the door behind him.

Knuckles sat back, nursing his knee, letting his gaze wander. The office was a mess; weird medical instruments, many from a bygone age, were crammed into every corner. *Gray's Anatomy* sat well-thumbed between a dusty model of the Visible Man (with tiny, removable organs) and a battery-powered prosthetic heart, gleefully thump-thumping on a surgical tray.

In the corner was a water cooler, filled not with water but formaldehyde. You could tell because of the dead mice floating around in it, tethered to the bottom with little safety lines. For an extra, homey touch, Tisdale had added an exercise wheel and a tiny, mouse-sized ladder.

Knuckles laughed—and stopped. Because something had occurred to him in mid-chuckle.

Maybe dead mice *could* exercise. Maybe, with the technology of the nineties, you could hollow 'em out and refit 'em, give 'em steel bones and nylon muscles and a cybernetic rodent brain—and then, presto! Only its little mouse-mom knows for sure.

And maybe—just maybe—once you'd made the mice run around, you'd get a little ambitious, you'd want to play Frankenstein. Maybe you'd find a body, dust it off, throw in a couple of D-cell batteries and watch to see what happened . . .

At Knuckles' elbow was a remote control, labeled MITSUBISHI. He picked it up, frowned, turned it over in his hand. Finally he poked the ON button.

And the mice began to dance.

"Sorry for the interruption," said Tisdale, stepping back into the office. "One of the medical supply houses is having a special on catheters."

"That's okay," said Knuckles. "It gave me a chance to do some thinking."

Tisdale smiled. "What about?"

"About someone who's been experimenting with reanimation," Knuckles explained. "Someone who needed bodies to practice on—and who maybe decided, just for convenience, to dig up *all the people I've ever murdered* and resurrect them, one at a time. Someone who never expected the bodies, once revived, to seek out their killer for some pathetic but irritating attempts at revenge."

"You can't be serious?" Tisdale whimpered.

"Can't I?" Knuckles poked his finger into the doctor's chest. "Who else knew where all the bodies were buried? Who else even remembers those twenty-year-old contracts—except maybe a washed-up mob sawbones, trying to make a few bucks off the bootleg dead-ers trade?"

Knuckles flicked his wrist, and something bright and sharp dropped into his hand.

"What have you got there?" Tisdale demanded.

"A scalpel," said Knuckles.

"Give it to me."

He did.

Salvatore "Knuckles" Dermicelli awoke to the sound of a yowling cat.

Bleary-eyed, he got out of bed, donned his bathrobe, threw the front door open. With a scrabble of claws on linoleum, Pesto darted inside. Knuckles leaned out and grabbed the morning paper, savoring the fresh air and the absence of zombies—

"Surprise," said Doc Tisdale.

He spun around. Tisdale was behind him, waiting in ambush, with vacant eyes and a scar across the trachea, holding a woodsman's axe above his head. Knuckles thought wildly that he was a much fresher corpse than the others, and probably harder to kill—

He dived headlong off the porch. The axe cleaved the air behind him, and *choonk!*ed into the soft wood. Knuckles rolled, fished the .45 from his bathrobe pocket, and put six bullets into Tisdale's head at point blank range.

Tisdale fell. He wasn't nice to look at.

Damn, thought Knuckles, gathering his wits. Tisdale couldn't have resurrected *himself*; there must be someone else out there, jump-starting his old enemies.

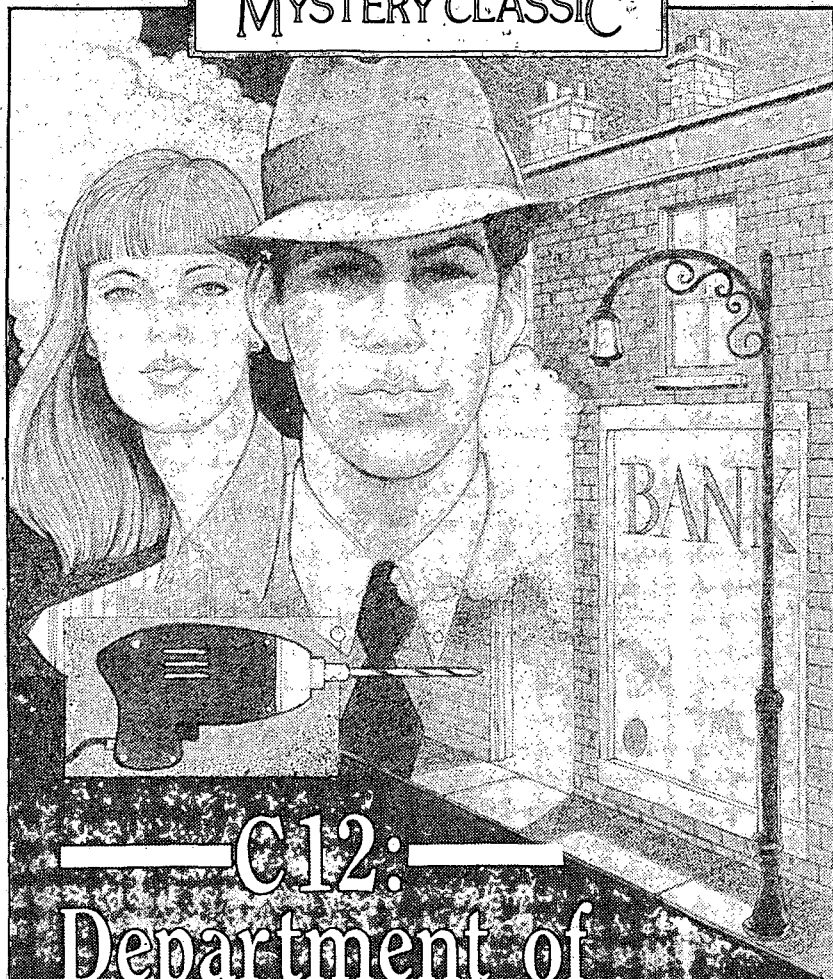
But who?

There was only one thing to do. He'd make a list of all the possible suspects, pick the likeliest and kill him. Or better still, kill 'em all. Bullets were cheap.

Besides, it'd give him something to do with his retirement.

Welcome to paradise, he thought.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



—C12:—
Department of
Bank Robberies

by Michael Gilbert

The drill screamed as it bit into the tough metal. The operator, a small man with a sad monkey-face, hummed to himself as he worked. It was the last of the eight holes which he was boring, four on either side of the hinge of the strongroom door.

When he had finished the drilling, and had checked, with a thermometer, that the surrounding metal had returned to a safe temperature, he filled each of the holes with Polar Ammon gelatine dynamite, tamping the puttylike stuff delicately home with the blunt end of a pencil; then he used the sharp end to bore a hole in the middle deep enough to take the tube of the copper electric detonator with its plastic-covered lead of tinned iron.

When all the detonators were in, he collected the eight ends, bared them, twisted them together, and covered the joint with insulating tape. Then he collected a pile of old army blankets and, helped now by a second man, draped them from wires which had already been fixed across the door.

Both men then retreated to the guard door at the entrance of the strongroom lobby. Two of the bars had been cut out. They squeezed through the gaps, dragging the plastic-covered lead behind them.

In the farthest corner of the outer lobby stood an ordinary six-volt car battery. The first man separated the lead wires and twisted one of them around the negative terminals.

Both men squatted down, backs against the wall, heads bent forward.

Then the second wire, carefully held in a rubber-gloved hand, was laid on the positive terminal. The shock wave of the explosion pinned them against the wall.

The third man, standing in the doorway of a shop outside, heard the crump of the explosion and swore softly to himself. The next ten minutes were going to be the most difficult.

A newsagent, sleeping four houses away on the opposite side of the street, sat up in bed, and said, "Cor, what was that? Have they declared war?" His wife said, "Wassup?" "Sounded like a bomb." "So what?" said his wife. "It hasn't hit us." She dragged him down into bed again.

Eight minutes. Nine minutes. Ten minutes. Eleven minutes. *What the hell are they playing at?* Twelve minutes.

The door of the shop opened and two men appeared. Both had heavy satchels slung over their shoulders. One carried the drill, another had the electric cutter that had been used to saw through the bars. The third man relieved them of drill and cutter and set

off at a brisk pace up the street to where the car was parked.

Not a word had been spoken from first to last.

Police Constable Owens, of the Gravesend Police, saw the car nosing into the street. He thought it odd that it should have no lights on, and held up a hand to stop it.

The car accelerated. Owens jumped, slipped, and fell into the gutter. He picked himself up in time to see the car corner and disappear.

Police Constable Owens limped to the nearest police box.

A pigeon took off from Boadicea's helmet and went into a power dive. It was aimed at the head of a young man with a brown face and black hair who had just crossed Westminster Bridge. Detective Patrick Petrella raised his arm. The pigeon executed a sideslip and volplaned off up into a tree. Petrella regarded the pigeon without malice.

It was a beautiful day. It was spring. He was starting a new job.

The message that had reached him at Gabriel Street Police Station had not been explicit, but he guessed that his spell of duty in South London was over. It had spanned three years; and he had enjoyed most of it, but three years in one place was enough.

He pushed his hat a little farther back on his head, and swung in under the Archway and up the three shallow steps into the main building of New Scotland Yard.

The private secretary, a serious young man in horn-rimmed glasses, inspected him as he came into the anteroom, and then said, "The A.C.'s ready for you. Will you go in?"

Petrella found himself straightening his shoulders as he marched by the inner door into the presence of Sir Wilfred Romer, assistant commissioner in charge of the Criminal Investigation Branch of the Metropolitan Police, and—in Petrella's humble opinion—the greatest thief catcher since Wensley.

"Sit down," said Romer. "You know Superintendent Baldwin, I think."

Petrella nodded to Superintendent Baldwin, big, red-faced, conscientiously ferocious, known to everyone from the newest recruit upward as Baldy.

Romer said, "I'm forming a new department. It'll be known as C12. And, broadly speaking—" here his face split in a wintry smile—"you're the department."

Petrella managed to smile back.

"You'll have two or three people to help you, but the smaller you

keep it, the happier I'll be. First, because we haven't got many spare hands, and secondly, because smallness means secrecy. Your first job will be the collection and analysis of information."

As Romer spoke, an alphabetical index of subjects, from arson to zoology, on which this remarkable man might be seeking information flipped through Petrella's aroused imagination.

"On bank robberies," concluded Romer.

"Yes, sir," said Petrella. "Bank robbery."

"Not bank robbery in general. It's a particular series of bank robberies that's getting under our skin. Never mind the details now. You'll get those from Baldwin. What I wanted to tell you was this. There's one thing we're quite certain of: there's an organizer. I want him put away. That'll be your second job."

Back in his own office, Baldwin filled in a few details.

"The bumph's in these folders," he said. "It'll take you a day or two to wade through it all. It goes back about seven years. We didn't know that there was any linkup, not at first. The actual jobs are done by different outfits. All pro stuff. Chick Selling and his crowd have been involved. And Walter Hudd. And the Band brothers. We're fairly certain it was them who did the Central Bank at Gravesend last month. You probably read about it."

Petrella nodded. He had heard enough about high-class safe-breakers to know that they left their signatures on their jobs as surely as great artists in other walks of life. He said, "What makes you so certain there's a linkup?"

"Three things." Baldwin ticked them off on the fingers of his big red hand. "First, they're getting absolutely accurate information. They've never taken a bank that wasn't stuffed with notes. And that isn't as common as you might think. You could open a lot of strongrooms and find nothing but Georgian silver and deed boxes.

"Second, the technique's the same. They always work from another building. Sometimes next door. Sometimes as much as three or four houses away—that means slicing through a lot of brickwork. They've got proper tools for that too, and they use them properly. Someone's taught 'em.

"And last, but not least, someone's supplying them with equipment. It's good stuff—so good it can't even be bought in this country for a legitimate job. When Walter Hudd's boys cracked the Sheffield District Bank, they had to cut and run and they left behind a high-speed film-cooled steel cutter that the London Salvage Corps have been asking for ever since they heard about it. It comes from Germany."

Later, installed in a small room on the top story of the Annex into which four desks had somehow been inserted, Petrella repeated much of this to his two aides. The first was Detective Sergeant Edwards, a solemn young man with the appearance and diction of a chartered accountant who was reputed to be extremely efficient in the organization of paperwork. The second—as Petrella was delighted to note—was none other than his old protégé, Detective Wilmot from Highside.

“Who’s the fourth?” said Petrella.

“We’re getting a female clerical assistant,” said Wilmot. “I asked at the typing pool who it was going to be, but no one seemed to know. I don’t mind betting, though, as we’re the youngest department, we shall get the oldest and ugliest secretary. Someone like Mrs. Proctor, who’s got buck teeth and something her best friends have got tired of telling her about. What do we do next?”

Petrella said, “No one really knows. We shall have to make most of it up as we go along. We’ve got to have the best possible liaison with the C.R.O. and the Information Room on the old jobs, and any new jobs that come along. Then we’ll have to circularize all provincial police forces, asking for information on suspicious circumstances—”

“Such as?” asked Edwards.

“First thing, we might see if we can get the banks to improve the reward system. At present, you only collect the cash if your information leads to someone’s being arrested. That’s not good enough. What happens at the moment is, someone hears a bang in the night. Might be something, might not. They go back to sleep again. If there was a reward—it needn’t be a big one—say, fifty pounds for the first man getting on the blower to the police station, we might get some action.

“Next, we’ll have to circularize local forces—for information about thefts of explosives, losses of strongroom keys, unexplained caches of notes, suspicious behavior near banks, bank employees with expensive tastes—”

“Bank managers with expensive mistresses.”

“That’ll be enough from you, Wilmot. Do you think you can draft us a circular?”

“Can do,” said Edwards.

“The three of us will have to be on the priority warning list through the Information Room, and the police station nearest our homes. We may be called out any hour of the day or night.”

“I’ll have to warn all my girlfriends,” said Wilmot.

That afternoon Petrella was sitting alone at his desk staring at the tips of his shoes when the door opened, a girl looked in and said, "Are you C12?"

"That's right," said Petrella.

"You certainly took some finding. Nobody seemed to have ever heard of you."

"We're a very important department. But very hush-hush."

"They haven't given you much of a room. My name's Orfrey, by the way."

"I can't help feeling," said Petrella, "that, as we shall be working together for an indefinite period in a space measuring not more than twelve feet by ten, I shall find myself addressing you, sooner or later, by your Christian name."

Miss Orfrey smiled. Petrella noticed that, when she smiled, she smiled with the whole of her face, crinkling up her eyes, parting her lips, and showing small, even white teeth.

"That name's Jane," she said. . . .

About a week later Jane Orfrey said to Wilmot, "Is he always as serious as this?"

"He's got a lot on his mind," said Wilmot.

"He might smile sometimes."

"It's make or break, really," said Wilmot. "If we sort out this lot, he gets the credit. If we don't, he gets a great big black mark."

"It doesn't seem to be worrying you."

"Paperwork doesn't mean a lot to me. I'm what you might call a man of action. What about coming to the pictures tonight?"

"Thank you," said Jane. "I'm going to take some of this paper home."

"It's a serious matter, sir," said Sergeant Edwards.

"What is?" said Petrella, coming up from the depths of his thoughts on the technical construction of strongroom doors.

"Our allowances."

"What about our allowances?"

"Now that we're working at Scotland Yard and on a special job, we ought to get a Special Service increment *and* a Central London increment. But the regulations say that where you're entitled to both, you can have the whole of whichever allowance you select, and fifty percent of the other one. I've been working it out—"

"And I thought you were doing something useful," said Petrella.

Sergeant Edwards looked aggrieved. . . .

Two o'clock on a Monday morning, twelve inches away from

Petrella's ear, the telephone screamed. He jerked upright, hit his head against the back of the bed, swore, and snatched the receiver off the instrument.

"Job at Slough," said a courteous and offensively wide-awake voice. "They've pulled in the men involved: Ronald, Kenneth, and Leslie Band. There'll be a car round for you in three minutes."

Petrella was still trying to button his shirt when he heard the car draw up. He finished his dressing sitting beside the driver as they sped along the empty roads toward Slough. The driver didn't seem to be pressing, but Petrella noticed the speedometer needle steady on the seventy mark. At that moment a motorcycle passed them, and he just had time to recognize Wilmot.

Inspector Lansell, of the Buckinghamshire C.I.D., was waiting for them in his office.

"It was the North Midland Bank," he said. "They cut their way through from the cellar of an empty shop next door. Must have started sometime on Saturday afternoon. Took all Saturday night and Sunday over the job. Blew the main strongroom door at half past one this morning. A chap living across the street heard it, and telephoned us. We had a patrol car a few streets away, and we got them as they came out."

"Good work," said Petrella. "I'll have a word with them now, if I may."

"They're all yours," said Lansell courteously.

The Band brothers were small, quiet, brown-faced men, all with good records of regular service in the Royal Engineers. By six o'clock Petrella had got what he could out of them. It wasn't a lot. They had all been in the hands of the police before, and they answered, blocked, or evaded the routine questions.

Petrella had hardly expected more, and was not depressed. He was particularly interested in two pieces of their equipment: a high-speed electric drill with an adjustable tungsten-tipped angle bit which had been used to drill a series of holes down either side of the hinge of the strongroom door; and an oxyacetylene white flame cutter, coupled with a small pumping device that stepped up the pressure and temperature of the flame.

Both were in ex-works condition. The cutter had initials and a number stamped on the base. It looked like shipyard equipment. There was a department in the Board of Trade that would probably be able to identify it for him. If it had been imported under license, it could be traced back to its maker.

Petrella had another reason for feeling pleased. The banks, some

of which had jibbed at his automatic alarm-reward system, would probably support it now that it had shown results.

He said to Inspector Lansell, "Any idea where my sergeant is?" "Haven't seen him," said Lansell. "I'll ask."

But no one in the station had seen him. Petrella traveled back to London on a train, crowded with coughing and sneezing commuters. He remembered the ice patches on the road and a nagging feeling of uneasiness traveled with him.

In the course of that morning he rang Information three times. No accidents to police officers had been reported.

At two o'clock Wilmot arrived, unshaven but unrepentant.

"I've got a feeling," he said—before Petrella could open his mouth—"that maybe we're onto something. It was a turn up for the book. I stopped just short of the High Street to ask the way to the station, and I saw these two in an all-night cafe over the way having a cuppa; and I said, oh, oh, what are *they* doing?"

"Take a deep breath," said Petrella, "and start again. You saw who?"

"Morris Franks and his brother Sammy."

"That pair," said Petrella, with distaste. "What do you imagine they were doing in Slough at three o'clock in the morning?"

"Just exactly what I said to myself. I said, here's the Band of Brothers robbing a bank—and here's two of the nastiest bits of work that ever come out of Whitechapel sitting in a cafe, two streets away from the scene of the crime, drinking tea. This'll stand looking into. So I parked my bike—I reckoned you could get on for a bit without me—"

"Thank you."

"—and I hung around . . . for hours and hours. They must've got through twelve cups of tea each. Just before seven o'clock they come out and took a train back to Paddington. I went with 'em. At Paddington they got on the Metropolitan, got off at Kings Cross, and walked towards the Angel. There were quite a few people about by that time. I don't think they spotted me."

Petrella was prepared to believe that. Wilmot's urchin figure would have melted as effectively into the background of Kings Cross and the Angel as any animal into its native jungle.

"They fetched up at a big builder's yard in Arblay Street. Jerry Light and Company. They walked straight in."

"Do you think they work there?"

"It looked like it. But that wasn't all. I hung round for a bit. Half a dozen others went in. I recognized one of them. It was Stoker."

Remember him?"

"Albert Stoker," said Petrella. "Yes. Certainly I remember him. He tried to kick my teeth in when I was up at Highside. He was working with Boot Howton and the Camden Town boys."

"If they're all like that," said Wilmot, "they're First Division stuff."

"Mr. Jerry Light would bear looking into," agreed Petrella.

That afternoon Petrella paid a visit to Arblay Street. Jerry Light's establishment occupied most of the north side. It was the sort of place that only London could have produced. What was originally an open space between two buildings had been filled, in the passage of time, with a clutter of smaller buildings, miscellaneous huts, sheds, and lean-to's, on top of, or propped up against, each other. Such space as remained was stacked, head high, with bricks, tiles, window frames, chimney pots, kitchen sinks, lavatory bowls, doors, pipes, and cisterns. An outside flight of steps lifted itself above the clutter to a door at first story level which was labeled MR. J. LIGHT.

As he watched, this door opened and a man came out. He was a very large man, with a cropped head, red face, and closely clipped mustache. A thick neck rose from magnificent shoulders and chest. It was a sergeant major's figure—the sort of figure which time, and inertia, would play tricks on, reversing the chest and the stomach as inevitably as sand reverses itself in an hourglass. But it had not done so yet. Mr. Jerry Light was, he judged, not more than forty-five and his eyes were still sharp as he stood surveying his cluttered kingdom.

Petrella walked quietly away.

Back at Scotland Yard he said to Edwards, "See if Records has anything on a Mr. Jerry Light. He runs a builder's yard at Islington, and you can find his full name and details through the Business Names Registry. Wilmot, I think it'd be a good idea if you went along and asked for a job."

"Suppose Stoker recognizes me? I had a bit of trouble with him myself at Highside, remember?"

"I'm counting on Stoker's recognizing you," said Petrella. "Then, if you're still given the job, it'll prove that Light's honest. If you don't get it, the chances are the outfit's crooked."

"Suppose they drop a chimney on me."

"Then we shall *know* they're dishonest," said Petrella. He had little fear for Wilmot's safety. Wilmot was extremely well equipped to look after himself.

Edwards was the first to report.

He said, "Gerald Abraham Light. He *has* got a record."

"Bank robbery."

Edwards smiled, and said, "Not robbing a bank. Assaulting a bank manager. In 1951 he was sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment at the Exeter autumn assizes for waylaying and assaulting the manager of the Exeter branch of the District Bank."

"Robbery?"

"Not robbing, sir. Assaulting. They knocked two of his teeth out, kicked in his ribs, and broke an arm."

"They?"

"There was another man. Alwyn Corder. He got twelve months, too."

"Why did they do it?"

"No motive was suggested at all. Mr. Justice Arbuthnot, in his summing up, called it 'a particularly cowardly and senseless assault.'"

Petrella's mind wasn't on Mr. Justice Arbuthnot. He had experienced a very faint, almost undetectable tremor of excitement—like that of a patient angler near whose bait a fish has swum, not seizing it but troubling it by his passage.

"Alwyn Corder," he said. "It's not a common name. I could bear to know what he's doing today."

"If he's had any other convictions, he should be easy to trace," said Edwards. "Incidentally, Light hasn't. That's the only time he's ever stepped out of line."

"It's the only time he's ever been caught," said Petrella.

It was seven o'clock that evening before Wilmot returned. C12 kept irregular hours. Sergeant Edwards was filing some papers. Jane Orfrey was filing her nails. Petrella was watching Jane Orfrey.

"Hired and fired," said Wilmot.

"What happened?"

"To start with, it all went like love's old sweet song. Mr. Light said I was just the sort of young man he was looking for. Clean, healthy, and not afraid of work. He explained how he ran his outfit, too. He works for big building contractors. Say one of them's doing a clearance job at Southend and wants extra help. Light sends a gang down. Half a dozen men—a dozen—however many he wants. Light takes a ten percent cut out of their wages. They reckon it's worthwhile because he keeps 'em in regular work."

"What went wrong?"

"What went wrong was, just as I was about to sign on, in comes Stoker."

"What happened?"

"It was a bit of an awkward moment, actually. Stoker went bright pink, and said he'd like a word outside with Mr. Light. So they stepped outside, shut the door, and I heard 'em yaw-yaw-yawing. Then Mr. Light came back and said, very polite, that he hadn't got a vacancy right now, but he'd let me know if he had one. So I scarpered—keeping my chin on my shoulder, just in case anyone tried to start anything."

"Lucky they didn't."

"I'll say it was lucky," said Wilmot. "Because if they had started anything, they might have spoiled this."

He took a handkerchief out of his side pocket and unwrapped it carefully. Inside was a lump of cobbler's wax. Impressed in the wax was the outline of a key.

"The key was on the inside of the door," said Wilmot. "I got it out while they were talking. Nice impression, isn't it? I know a little man who'll make it for us while we wait."

Petrella said, "Are you suggesting that we break into this office?"

"That's right. We could get over the side wall. Borrow a ladder. Plenty of them about."

"You realize that we should be breaking practically every rule in the Metropolitan Police Code?"

"That's right."

"And if we're caught we shall both be sacked."

"That's why I'm not planning to get caught, personally," said Wilmot.

It was half an hour after midnight when they backed the little van into the passageway behind Light's yard. A veil of drizzling rain had cut down visibility to a few yards.

"Perfect night for crime," said Wilmot. "You hold the ladder. I'll go first. I think I saw some broken bottle on the top of this wall."

Petrella gave him a minute's start, then followed. Negotiated with care, the ragged *cheveux-de-frise* presented little obstacle. Petrella let himself down on the other side, and Wilmot's hand grabbed his foot and steered it onto an upended cistern.

Five minutes later they were in Jerry Light's office, carefully fastening the blanket, which Wilmot had brought with him, over the only window.

Petrella then turned on his lantern torch and stood it on the floor.

"Better get cracking," he said. "It looks like a lot of work."

One closet contained box files full of bills, invoices, and trade correspondence. Another was devoted to builder's catalogues, price lists, and samples mixed with old telephone and street directories, technical publications, and an astonishing collection of paperback novels. The desk was full of mixed correspondence and bills. The old fashioned safe in the corner was locked.

Three hours of hard work convinced Petrella that Mr. Light had a perfectly genuine builder's business.

"There's only one thing here I don't quite understand," he said. "Why should he bother to keep a seven-year-old diary in the top left-hand drawer of his desk? Anything you kept close at hand like that, you'd expect it to be important, wouldn't you?"

"Probably forgot to throw it away."

"But why keep a seven-year-old one, and throw away the other six?"

Wilmot came across to have a look.

"There's something else odd about it, too," said Petrella. "Do you see?"

Wilmot focused his torch on the open book and studied it carefully.

"Doesn't seem to mean a lot," he said. "There's something written on each page. Sort of shorthand. Perhaps it's business appointments."

"That's what I thought at first. But would he have business appointments on Sunday too?"

"Doesn't seem likely," agreed Wilmot. "What are you going to do?"

"We can't take it away. If it's important, he's bound to miss it. We'll have to photograph it." He produced from his coat pocket a small black box. "We'll prop it up on the desk. Shine your torch on it, and turn each page when I say."

It took them an hour to finish the job, replace the book, and tidy up.

"If there's anything important," said Petrella, "it's in the safe. I'm afraid that's beyond us."

"You never know," said Wilmot. "I found this key in that closet. It's just the sort of place people do hide their safe keys. See if it fits."

Petrella took the key, inserted it in the lock, and exerted pres-

sure. There was a tiny sensation of prickling in his fingers, and the key turned.

"Nice work," said Wilmot. "Let's see what he keeps in the old strongbox. Hello! What is it? Something wrong?"

Petrella had relocked the safe. Now he walked across and replaced the key in the closet. He did this without haste, but without loss of time.

"We're getting out of here," he said, "and damned quick. That safe's wired to an alarm. I set it off when I turned the key."

He picked up the torch from the floor and made a careful tour of the room. There wasn't a great deal to do. But it took time.

"All right," Petrella said at last. "When I turn out the torch, get the blanket down."

"Nick of time," said Wilmot.

They could both hear the car coming . . .

As they locked the office door behind them and went down the steps into the yard, headlights swiveled round the corner, throwing the main gate into relief. Brakes screamed; a car door slammed; a voice started giving orders.

Wilmot lay across the wall, leaned down, and pulled Petrella up beside him. There was no time for finesse. Petrella heard the cloth of his trousers rip on the broken glass as he swung his legs across, felt a stinging pain in his thigh, and the warm rush of blood down his leg.

Then he was following Wilmot down the ladder. As he reached the ground, Wilmot's hand grabbed his arm.

Footsteps were echoing along the pavement.

Wilmot put his mouth close to Petrella's ear. "They've sent someone round the back," he said. "I'll have to fix him."

Petrella nodded. He could feel the blood running into his shoe.

Wilmot crouched, pressed against the wall. The dim form of a man appeared at the mouth of the passage and came on, unsuspecting. Wilmot straightened up, and hit him once, from below, at the exact point where trousers and shirt joined.

The man said something which sounded like "aaargh," and folded forward onto his knees. As Wilmot and Petrella picked their way past him, he was still fighting for breath.

"What *are* these?" said Jane Orfrey.

"They're ten-magnification enlargements of microfilm shots of the pages in a seven-year-old desk diary."

"But what do they mean?"

"If I knew that," said Petrella, "I'd know whether I risked my professional career last night for something or for nothing. I want you to go through every entry. I expect it's a code—the homemade sort that's so damned difficult to decipher, where U.J. can mean Uncle Jimmy, Ursula Jeans, *and* the Union Jack. You'll need a lot of patience with it."

Jane said, "We got something useful this morning. Do you remember Mallindales? The installment buying house? It was in answer to one of our circulars about marked and series notes."

There were two things, thought Petrella, about Jane Orfrey. The first was that she said *we* quite naturally, identifying herself as a member of the outfit. The other was that she had carried out every job she had been given without once saying, "I'm only here to type letters." He wondered, not for the first time, how they had been lucky enough to get her.

"You're not listening to a word I'm saying."

"I'm sorry," said Petrella. "We've had a lot of answers in to that particular inquiry."

"Mallindales told us they had a special stamp which they used on all their banknotes. Remember? The point about it was that it didn't appear to mark the notes at all. But if you held one of them flat, and looked across it in an oblique light, you could see the letters MD."

"I remember now," said Petrella. "They'd paid in a couple of hundred marked notes the day before the Maritime Bank at Liverpool was broken open. They thought we might locate some of them because the thieves wouldn't realize they were marked."

"We *have* located one. It turned up yesterday, in the possession of a character called Looey Bell. He's a smalltime thief who was picked up by the Highside police for illicit door-to-door collection."

"And this was part of the money he'd collected?"

"That's right. The only person—he says—who gave him a bank-note was the local parson."

Petrella considered the matter. A clergyman who gave away pound notes to strangers who came to the door sounded like an unusual character.

"He might be worth looking into."

"Wilmot's looking into him now."

"He's cracked," reported Wilmot when he came back after tea.

"He tried to give *me* a pound. He said I looked like a very nice young man."

"Who is he?"

"The Reverend Mortleman, Vicar of St. John at Patmos, Crouch End. When I'd convinced him that I was a police officer and not a Good Cause, he spun me a yarn about a party who gave him money to give to the deserving poor. Some old girl with more money than sense, who knew Mortleman when he was an assistant clergyman at St. Barnabas, Pont Street, I gather. He wouldn't tell me her name."

"That sounds plausible," said Petrella. "A lot of rich people go to St. Barnabas. One of them might be sending him money for his local charities."

"I could probably find out who it was if I made a few inquiries."

Petrella considered the matter. He had to be careful not to disperse the efforts of his small force by chasing red herrings. "Let it stop there for the moment," he said. "I'll get the local boys to watch out. If they find any more of these MD notes circulating in those parts, we'll reconsider."

The next MD note arrived from quite a different source. A waiter at the Homburg-Carleton, going home in the early hours of the morning, started by accusing a taxi driver of overcharging him, then assaulted him, and finished up in custody. The station sergeant, checking his belongings before he was put into a cell, found three pound notes in his wallet, all marked with the Mallindales stamp, and brought them round personally to New Scotland Yard.

Petrella said, "Three of them together! That looks more like it. Where did he say he got them from?"

"He said they were his share of that evening's take."

"Then they must have come from someone dining at the Homburg. Good work, sergeant. We'll follow it up."

Jane Orfrey spent the afternoon with the restaurant manager and came back with a list of three public dinners, five private dinners, and the names of the eighty-four people who had actually booked tables that night.

"It's impossible to identify their guests," she said. "And there were one or two people who came in without booking."

"It's not so bad," said Petrella. "Agreed, we can't do anything about the people who didn't book. But there weren't a lot of those. And why bother about the guests? Guests charge it to their bills. As for the big dinners, it's only the organizers of those who matter. A bit more work and we can boil this down to quite a short list."

"Suppose we boil it down to two or three names," said the girl. "What do we do then? Go and ask them if they know any bank robbers?"

Petrella looked at her curiously. "You need a break," he said. "You've been overworking."

Jane said stiffly, "It's the most interesting job I've ever done. I don't want to fall down on it; that's all."

"When we heard we were going to get a secretary," said Petrella, "I remember Wilmot said—" at this point, he remembered what Wilmot *had* said, and improvised rapidly "—As we're the youngest department, we're bound to get the worst secretary.' I think we had a bit of luck there. I think we got the best."

"It's nice of you to say so."

"It must have been a slip-up in the typing pool. They'd earmarked someone like Mrs. Proctor for us, and they pulled the wrong card out of the filing cabinet."

"I don't think the typing pool had much say in the matter," said Jane. "I was posted here direct by Uncle Wilfred."

"Uncle Wilfred?"

"The assistant commissioner. He's my mother's elder brother."

"Good heavens," said Petrella, thinking back quickly over some of Wilmot's strictures on the top brass. "You might have told us sooner."

"You're the only person I have told," said Jane.

Petrella, looking at his watch, was surprised to see that it was nearly half past seven. He was on the point of saying, "Let's go out and get something to eat," when it occurred to him that Jane might think he was asking her out because she was the assistant commissioner's niece.

He swallowed the words, and said abruptly, "Goodnight."

After he had gone, Jane sat for a whole minute staring at the closed door. Then she said out loud, "Silly cuckoo. You oughtn't to have told him. Now he's clammed up again."

When Petrella arrived at Scotland Yard on Monday morning, he could almost feel the thunder in the air. He went straight to Chief Superintendent Baldwin's office.

"You got my note?" said Baldwin.

"I didn't get any note," said Petrella, "but I heard the early morning news. It's not too good, is it?"

"It's damned bad," said Baldwin. "Two jobs on the same night. The Manchester one was the biggest haul yet. What was really unfortunate was that the bank knew they were vulnerable—it was one of the payoff days for the Town Centre Reconstruction—and they'd asked the police to keep a special watch."

Petrella said, "How did they get in?"

"It was clever. One thing the police were on the lookout for was empty premises, near the bank. There weren't any. Just a block of offices, all let. The people who pulled this job must have planned it six months ago. That was when they took this office, two away from the bank. They cut through the wall, crossed the intervening office after it closed on Saturday, cut through the second wall, broke into the bank itself, and opened the strongroom some time on Sunday night. No one heard them. It isn't a residential area."

"What now?"

"Now," said Baldwin grimly, "the local force, prodded by the banks, are asking us to help, and when they say help, they mean something more than research and coordination."

"What did they have in mind?"

"Two or three mobile teams of special officers, working on the lines of the murder squad."

Petrella felt cold.

"That'll be quite an organization," he said. "I suppose we should be swallowed up in it."

Seeing his face, Baldwin laughed and said, "It may never happen. But it means we've got to get results, quick. How far have you got?"

It was a question Petrella found embarrassing to answer. It seemed pompous to say, "We're still analyzing information. You can't expect results until the analysis is complete." So he said, "We've one definite line. It may lead somewhere." He explained about Jerry Light.

"Do you think he runs the whole show?"

"I don't think so, no. My guess is that he runs the heavy mob. This organization has its own Flying Squad. When a job's being done, one or two of them will be on hand to get back the equipment, and collect the organizer's share of the loot."

"If that's so," said Baldwin, "there must be a link between Light and the head man."

"We're working on that angle," said Petrella. He thought it wiser not to say too much about the diary, or the circumstances in which it had come into their possession. "Another way would be to trace the equipment, from the factory. It would mean going over to West Germany."

"That could be fixed," said Baldwin. "We'd need a few days to make the arrangements. You'd go yourself. Do you talk any German?"

"Enough to get on with," said Petrella, in German.

When he got back to his room, he was tackled by Sergeant Edwards, with a worried face.

"You'd hardly think," he said, "that a man with an uncommon name like Alwyn Corder could disappear off the face of the earth, would you?"

So much had happened recently that it took Petrella a moment to think who Alwyn Corder was. Then he said, "You mean the other man, the one who helped Light assault that bank manager at Exeter."

"Yes. Corder was one of the joint managing directors in a demolition firm. Light worked for the same firm."

"Managing director? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. It's all in the Company Office Records. The other director was a Douglas Marchant. Marchant and Corder started the firm just after the war. It went broke in 1952. I've searched every record we possess—not only the directories, but electors registers, motor car license lists, passport office lists—"

"Perhaps he's dead."

"The Register of Deaths at Somerset House was the first place I searched."

"Well," said Petrella. "Perhaps—" and got no further because Wilmot came in like an express train.

"Guess what?" he said. And gave them no time to guess. "A third banknote's turned up, *and we've got a crossreference.*"

Three heads went up, like three nestlings offered food.

"A jobbing printer in New Cross. Luckily he used the note for a subscription to the local police charity. When they saw the mark, they took it back to him, and he said it was part of a payment he'd had that morning for a job he'd done printing the souvenir menus for a charity dinner—" Wilmot paused with considerable artistry "—at the Homburg-Carleton."

"Good work," said Petrella softly. "Which charity?"

"It's a society that sends kids to the seaside."

Petrella turned up his list. "That's right," he said. "The S.S.H.U.C. They were having a show that night. Can't be a coincidence."

"Who was the organizer?" said Jane.

"Mrs. Constantia Velden, O.B.E."

"I'm sure I know the name. Doesn't she do a lot of these things? She's almost a professional organizer."

"Out of my line."

"It's in mine," said Jane. "I did a London season."

She departed.

There was a lot of checking and crosschecking to be done, and it was after six before she came back. Sergeant Edwards and Wil-mot had gone home. Petrella saw, from the pink patches in her cheeks and the sparkle in her eye, that something had happened.

"I've located your woman organizer," she said. "She lives in a very nice house in St. Johns Wood, with a cook, a chauffeur, and three dalmatians. Oozing with money and good works."

"What else?"

"How do you know there's something else?"

"Because you're almost bursting to tell me."

"I've a good mind not to," said Jane. "Well, all right. As a matter of fact, it didn't take very long to find out about Mrs. Velden. And it was a nice day. So I went on up to Crouch End and saw the Reverend Mortleman."

"The devil you did! What did you say?"

"I said I was Mrs. Velden's secretary, and she was a bit anxious because he hadn't acknowledged the last lot of money she'd sent him."

Petrella stared at her.

"He was most upset. Said he was sure he had acknowledged it. He insisted on my coming in, so that he could find a carbon copy of his letter to Mrs. Velden. He did find it, too. So I apologized. Then we had tea together."

When Petrella had recovered his breath he said, "You were taking a bit of a chance, weren't you? Suppose he'd known Mrs. Velden's secretary by sight."

"He couldn't have known her new one."

"Her new one?"

"She's been advertising in the *Times*. That's what gave me the idea. Couldn't I answer the advertisement?"

Before Petrella could string together some of the many ways of saying no to this outrageous proposal, she hurried on.

"I don't suppose Mrs. Velden's a master criminal. She certainly doesn't sound like one. But all this money is coming *through* her. She must have some connection with the organizers. If I was working for her, and kept my eyes open, I could probably spot—"

Petrella found his voice at last. "You're not even a policewoman," he said. "You're a typist."

It wasn't, perhaps, the best way of putting it. Jane turned dark red, and said, "Of all the stupid, stuffy, ungrateful things to say—"

"I'm sorry . . ."

"Don't you *want* to solve this. Don't you *want* to find out who's running it?"

"Now you're being silly."

"At least I'm not being pompous."

Petrella said, "I'm sorry if I sound pompous, but what you don't seem to realize is that I can't possibly let you take an active part in this, without getting into frightful trouble with the Establishment." He added hastily, "It's very late, and we're both a bit tired, I expect. Come and have something to eat."

"Thank you," said Jane, "but as a typist, I know my place." She made a dignified exit.

Petrella swore, and took a running kick at the metal wastepaper basket. It rose in a neat parabola and broke a window.

Next morning Petrella made a point of getting to the office early. He found Jane alone there, typing furiously. He selected the most propitiatory of half a dozen opening gambits which he had worked out during a sleepless night.

Before he could start, Jane said, "I'm sorry I was stupid last night. Obviously you couldn't do it."

This took the wind out of Petrella's sails so effectively that he could only stare at her.

"As a matter of fact," he said at last, "I had a word with the A.C.—with your uncle, that is—and he said that, compared with some of the things you'd tried to talk him into letting you do, this sounded comparatively harmless."

"Bully for Uncle Wilfred."

"But he laid down certain conditions. First, you're to report, by telephone, to this office every night between five and seven. Use a call box, not a private telephone. Second, if ever you're going out anywhere, you're to let us know where you're going."

"It all seems a bit unnecessary to me," said Jane. "But I'll do it if you insist."

"All that remains now is for you to get the job."

"I rather think I've got it. I went round to see Mrs. Velden last night. It turned out that she knew a friend of a friend of my mother's. We got on like a house on fire." Seeing the look in Petrella's eye, she added hastily, "Of course, if you'd said no, I wouldn't have taken the job. I thought there was no harm in seeing if I could get it. And I'll remember to telephone you every night."

"It won't be me for the next few nights," said Petrella. "I'm off to Germany."

The Baron von der Hulde und Oberath propelled a cedarwood cabinet of king-sized cigars across the top of his desk toward Petrella, helped himself to one, lit both of them with a long match, and picked up the photograph again.

"Certainly this is one of our drills," he said. "What can I tell you about it."

"How long has it been in production?"

"Five years. A little more."

"And in that time how many would you have exported to England?"

"I should have to consult my records. Perhaps a hundred." Petrella's heart sank.

"It is a highly efficient drill," said the baron. "I sent half a dozen the other day to one of your safe deposits."

"Safe deposits?"

"A good safe deposit only possesses one key for each of its safes. If the depositor loses it, the safe has to be broken open. The screws of the hinges have to be drilled out—but it takes an exceptionally good drill to do it. Any ordinary one would break, or melt. A number of cooling devices had been tried before. None successfully. Then we invented this method. It is so very simple. As the drill gets hotter, it sweats. Just like the human body. It exudes its own lubricant. We call it 'film cooling.'"

"I see," said Petrella. "And no one else but you makes these drills?"

"We have the world patent."

"Then you could compile, from your records, a list of people in England whom you have supplied?"

"I could no doubt do so, but it might take a couple of days."

"It'll be worth waiting for."

"When the list is ready I will telephone your hotel. The Goldenes Kreuz, isn't it? Take another cigar with you, please. You can smoke it this evening."

Petrella spent the afternoon exploring Dortmund, mostly from the top of a tram. It seemed to him an unattractive city. At seven o'clock he got back to his hotel, and had a bath. Then he set out to have a look at the night life.

First, he stood himself a large, and rather heavy, meal at the Barberina. Then he moved on to one of the many beer cellars in the Augusta Platz and ordered a stein of what described itself as the world famous Munchner Lowenbrau, which tasted no better and no worse than any lager beer he had drunk in an English pub.

On the wall opposite was an advertisement, depicting a man with a monocle smoking a cigar. It looked like a stylized version of the Baron von der Hulde und Oberath. As this thought occurred to him, another one crossed his mind; and he put down his beer slowly.

The baron had said, "I will telephone your hotel—the Goldenes Kreuz." How did he know which hotel to telephone? Petrella had certainly not told him.

He went back, very carefully, over the events of the morning. He had driven straight from the airport to the headquarters of the city police, to check in with Inspector Laufer, a contact arranged for him by Baldy. The inspector had given him the names of the possible manufacturers of drills, of which the baron had been the largest and the most likely.

Might the inspector have telephoned the baron, to tell him Petrella was coming, and might he have mentioned the name of his hotel?

No. That was impossible. For the simple reason that Petrella had not, at that time, chosen a hotel. He had gone to the Goldenes Kreuz after leaving the police station.

It was at this point that his thoughts became linked with a suspicion which had never been quite out of his mind since he had left the hotel.

He was being followed.

It was impossible to say how he knew, but now that he gave his mind to it, he was quite certain. In London the discovery would not have worried him. Here, in a foreign country, in a strange city, it was less agreeable.

His first idea was to telephone Inspector Laufer, but he dismissed it as soon as he thought of it. There was no explanation he could make which would not sound ludicrous. Dortmund might not be beautiful, but it was a well-organized modern city, with an efficient police force and well-lit streets. All he had to do was to walk back to his hotel, go up to his room, bolt the door on the inside, and go to bed.

He paid his bill, recovered his coat and hat, and climbed the steps that led up to the street.

A storm of rain had cleared the air and emptied the streets. He stepped out briskly. No one seemed to be taking the least interest in him. Halfway down the Augusta Platz he had to turn right, into the smaller street that would, in turn, bring him to the Station Square.

It was at this moment that he heard the car start off behind him. Something in the note of the engine sounded a warning. He jerked his head round and saw the car coming, straight at him.

Without stopping to think, he jerked himself to one side, spotted a narrow side street ahead, and ran down it. It was when he heard the car going into reverse that he realized his mistake. He should have stuck to the main street.

The side street stretched ahead of him, badly lit, absolutely empty, sloping steeply downhill. Behind him, the headlamps of the car flicked on, pinning him.

He reckoned he had a good twenty yards' start. On his left stretched the unbroken wall of a large building; no entrance, not even a recess. The right-hand side was blocked by a high iron railing.

He put on speed. There was a T junction at the bottom, and what looked like a rather better-lighted road. He swung round the corner. The car, which had been catching up, cornered behind him.

Petrella sidestepped. His plan was to turn in his tracks, and run in the opposite direction before the car could turn. He had reckoned without the driver. As he sidestepped, the car swerved too. The wing caught him in the small of the back, scooped him up, and tossed him against the fence that bordered the road.

The car screamed to a halt and went into reverse.

Petrella was lying at the inner edge of the pavement, close to the fence. There was a stabbing pain in his chest, and he seemed to have lost the use of his legs.

He could see the driver now, with his head out of the side window. He had a heavy, white, bad-tempered face.

As he watched, the driver maneuvered the near-side wheels of his car carefully up on to the pavement, judged the distance to where Petrella lay, and started to reverse.

When he's been over me once, thought Petrella, he'll come back again just to make sure. Petrella's legs were like sacks of sand, but he still had the use of his arms. Pressing on the pavement, he rolled himself over, and then over again until he was pressed hard against the bottom of the wooden fence.

It was no use. The car was on him now. The near-side wheels were going over him.

Petrella heaved wildly, felt the skirting board at the foot of the fence bend, and heaved again. There was a dull crack. A complete length of board gave way, and Petrella went rolling, over and over, down a grassy bank to come to rest with a thud at the bottom.

He was on gravel. His groping hand found a wire, and he hauled himself up on his knees. The fall had done something for his legs, which were now hurting as much as his chest; but they seemed to be answering signals again. He crawled forward, pulling himself by the wire.

The fence rocked and splintered as his pursuers, too bulky to squeeze through the space underneath, battered it down.

Petrella crawled faster.

Behind him he heard the fence go down with a crack.

There was a circular opening on the left. It looked like a drain. He crawled into it, until a bend in the pipe forced him to stop. Footsteps thundered past. Men were shouting. There was a rumbling, thudding noise which shook the ground; a hiss of steam, and the clanking of iron on iron.

For the first time he realized that he was on a railway line. The wire he had been following must have been a signal wire. What he was in now was some sort of rainwater conduit. There was plenty of water coming down it, too.

More voices, angry voices. Official voices. A dog barking.

Petrella pushed himself backward until he was out in the open again. Some way up the line an argument was going on. Orders were being shouted in loud, angry German.

Petrella propped himself against the bank, and started massaging the life back into his sodden legs. A dog slipped out of the darkness and stood watching him.

"Good boy," said Petrella hopefully. The dog gave a sharp bark, like a sergeant major calling the parade to attention.

Two men appeared. They were in the green uniform of the railway police. As soon as they saw him, both of them started to shout.

When they seemed to have finished, Petrella said in impeccable German, "Conduct me, at once, if you please, to Inspector Laufer, of the municipal police."

Even the dog seemed impressed by this.

Constantia Velden was a compulsive talker. She didn't really need a secretary, Jane Orfrey decided. What she needed was a captive audience. And Jane, for two whole days, had been it.

There were advantages, of course. Within an hour, and without any actual effort on her part, she had learned almost all there was to know about Constantia; about her late husband, who had been an administrative officer in the air force, and had died of hepatic jaundice in 1955; about her brother, Douglas, a wing commander,

D.S.O., D.F.C., now the managing director of a firm manufacturing window frames, with a London office in Lennox Street; about Constantia's charitable enterprises; about the time Constantia had shaken hands with the queen; about life; about money.

Money seemed to come into most of Mrs. Velden's calculations. Reading between the lines, Jane deduced that she had inherited a reasonable competence from her late husband, and that she was helped out, where necessary, by her brother. He advised her on her investments and looked after her tax. He had also brought Alex into the picture, and probably paid his salary as well.

Alex was the only other resident at the Loudon Road house, and was chauffeur, butler, gardener, and footman combined. A husky, brown-haired, freckled boy, who looked no more than sixteen and was in fact in his early twenties, he did everything that was beyond the strength or capacity of Mrs. Velden and her cohort of daily women. What spare time Alex had, he spent polishing his employer's car and tuning up his own motorcycle.

He was out with her now. A lunch date with brother Douglas, she gathered. Jane munched her way through a solitary meal, and wondered, for the twentieth time, what possible connection her talkative, middle-aged employer could have with an organization which had made bank robbery a fine art. Her faith told her that the connection was there: After forty-eight hours, her reason was beginning to doubt it.

It was three o'clock before the car reappeared in Loudon Road and Alex jumped out and held the door open for Mrs. Velden. Jane caught a glimpse of her, and of the man who followed her out. So Douglas had accompanied his sister home. Interesting.

Then the drawing room door opened, and he came in, holding it open for his sister and closing it behind her.

He was a man of about six feet, with the round shoulders and barrel chest of a boxer; thick black hair, graying round the edges; a face dominated by a long straight nose which turned out, suddenly, at the end, over a bush of gray mustache. Like a downpipe, she thought, emptying into a clump of weeds. A disillusioned pair of eyes peered out from under thick black eyebrows.

"Wing Commander Marchant, Jane Orfrey."

"Plain Douglas Marchant, if you don't mind," said the man. "You're my sister's new secretary. Has she driven you mad yet?"

"Really, Douglas . . ."

"If she hasn't, she will. She goes through secretaries at the rate of two a week. She's a Gorgon. She doesn't realize that the days

of indentured labor are over. There are more jobs than secretaries. Girls please themselves. Isn't that right?"

"More or less," said Jane.

"As soon as you present yourself to an agency, they offer you a dozen jobs, and say take your pick."

"It isn't quite as easy as that."

"What agency do you use, by the way?"

It came out so swiftly that Jane gaped for a moment, and said, "As a matter of fact, I got this job through an advertisement."

"But you must have an agency," said Douglas gently. "You'll never get properly paid if you don't."

"Really, Douglas," said Constantia. "Are you trying to lure her away?"

"I don't see why not. I don't mind betting you underpay her."

"Perhaps she doesn't want to work in an office."

"I think it would be terribly dull," said Jane.

"You wouldn't be dull in my office," said Douglas. "Eighteen pounds a week, and luncheon vouchers."

Jane felt it was time she asserted herself. "If I had to work in an office," she said, "I'd choose a professional office, I think. Not a commercial one."

"There, if I may say so, you display your ignorance," said Douglas. "Professional men overwork their staff and underpay them. They operate on too small a scale to do anything else. We're just the opposite. We've got factories all over England. There's hardly a building goes up that hasn't got our windows in it."

"You may be right," said Jane. "But personally I find businessmen so boring. They think and talk of nothing but money."

"What businessmen have you worked for?" inquired Douglas politely.

Damn, thought Jane. I walked into that one. Better watch out. He's a lot cleverer than he looks.

"Two or three," she said. And to Constantia, "Should I see if we can raise a cup of tea?"

"Not for me," said Douglas. "I've got to be off. A bit of money-grubbing to do. I'll get Alex to drive me back into town, if you don't mind."

Jane telephoned Sergeant Wilmot at six o'clock that evening, from a call box on Hampstead Heath. "This is urgent," she said. "See what you can find out about Douglas Marchant. Ex-R.A.F. Runs a business which makes windows. Not widows—windows. It's

got a head office in Lennox Street, and factories all over the place."

"Wasn't he the other director in the firm Light worked for, just after the war?"

"That's right. And he's Mrs. Velden's brother. He gives her money. Any banknotes she's been passing could easily have come from him."

"I suppose they could have."

She could hear the doubt in Wilmot's voice, and said urgently, "We're looking for a man who *could* run a show like this. Well, I'm telling you, Douglas Marchant fills the bill. I can't explain it all over the telephone. But he's big enough and bad enough—"

"A big bad wolf," said Wilmot. "Okay, I'll take your word for it. We'll certainly have him checked up."

"Any news from Germany?"

"Not a word," said Wilmot.

As Jane came out of the telephone booth she heard a motorcycle start up and move off. When she got back the house was in darkness, and she let herself in with her own key, and went into the drawing room.

She felt restless and uneasy, and had no difficulty in putting her finger on the cause of it. The powerful and unpleasant personality of Douglas Marchant seemed to linger in the room, like the smell of a cigar long after its owner has departed. She realized that it was the first time she had been alone in the house.

Leaving the light on in the drawing room, she went along to what Constantia called her business room at the end of the hall. Her objective was Constantia's desk. She found that all the drawers in it were locked, so was the filing cabinet, and so were the closets under the bookcases that lined one wall. The books in the shelves were mostly political and military history, and this surprised her, until it occurred to her that they probably represented the departed Mr. Velden's taste rather than Constantia's.

She took down one of the six volumes of Lloyd George's *War Memoirs*, blew the dust off the top, and opened it.

From an ornate bookplate the name jumped out at her—ALWYN CORDER.

Jane stared at it in blank disbelief. Then she started taking down books at random. The bookplate was in most of them. For a moment she was unable to think straight. She knew that she had stumbled on something desperately important.

A slight sound at the door made her swing around. Alex was smiling at her. "Looking for something to read?" he said.

Sergeant Edwards said to Wilmot, "It's a big company. Douglas Marchant is the chairman. Leaves most of the work to his staff, and comes up twice a week from the country to justify his director's fees."

"Anything known?"

"As far as Records know, the company and Marchant are both as clean as two proverbial whistles. What have we got on them?"

"What we've got," said Wilmot, "is a woman's instinct. Jane doesn't like his smell. She thinks he's a bad one."

"It doesn't seem a lot to go on," said Edwards doubtfully. "When's Petrella coming back?"

"Baldy hasn't heard a chirrup out of him for twenty-four hours," said Wilmot. "If you ask me, he's found himself a Rhinemaiden."

It was after midnight when the bedside telephone rang. The redheaded girl who had been sharing Douglas Marchant's flat, and bed, for the past month groaned and said, "Don't take any notice, Doug. It's probably a wrong number."

"Hand it over," said Douglas, who was lying on his back beside her. He balanced the instrument on his stomach and unhooked the receiver. As soon as he heard the voice at the other end he cupped a hand over the receiver and said, "Out you get, honey. It's business."

"This is a nice time to do business."

"Get up and get us both a cup of tea."

Not until the girl had grumbled her way into a dressing gown and out of the room did Douglas remove his hand from the receiver and say, "Sorry, Alex, there was someone here. It's all right now. Go ahead."

His pajama top was unbuttoned, showing a chest fuzzed with graying black hair. One of his thick hands held the telephone. The other was fumbling on the bedside table for a cigarette. His face was expressionless.

At the end he said, "Let's see if I've got this straight. Each of the three evenings she's been there, she's been out about the same time and made a call from a public phone booth. And this evening you found her in the library, snooping through a lot of books which had the old bookplates still in them. Damn, damn, and damn."

There was a long silence as if each was waiting for the other to speak.

Then Douglas said, "If she's what we think she is, and if she's got a regular reporting time, she won't pass any of this on until

six o'clock tomorrow night. We ought to do something about it before then, I think."

Alex said, "Yes. I think we ought."

"I can't attend to it myself. I'm flying over to Germany tomorrow afternoon. There's been some trouble at the factory. Could you think of an excuse to take her out in the car?"

Alex said, "Suppose I said I had left some papers at the office which had to be taken to the airport—and you had a message for your sister—something like that."

"It's worth trying," said Douglas.

"When I get her in the car—what then?"

"My dear Alex, I must leave all the arrangements to you. A moonlight picnic, perhaps."

As he rang off, the redhaired girl came back with two cups of tea. Douglas drank his slowly. He didn't seem to want to talk. The redheaded girl thought that Douglas, though a generous spender, was a tiny bit odd, and had been becoming odder just lately.

Now the look in his eyes frightened her. At the age of twenty-five she was something of an expert on men, and she made up her mind, there and then, to clear out while Douglas was in Germany—and not to come back.

When, late the following afternoon, Alex told Jane that he had to collect some papers and take them to the airport, and that Marchant had asked that she should go too so that he could give her a message for his sister, her first reaction was to say no. Then she reflected that no harm could really be planned on the crowded roads between Central London and London Airport.

"I'll have to ask Mrs. Velden," she said.

"I've asked her. She says the trip'll do you good."

"When do we start?"

"Right now."

"I'll have to get a coat," said Jane.

She ran up to her room and stood listening. The house was quiet. She tiptoed across the corridor and into Mrs. Velden's bedroom. As she had hoped, there was a bedside telephone extension. She grabbed the receiver, and dialed the special number which she knew by heart.

"Hello," said Wilmot's voice. "What's up?"

"No time to explain," said Jane. "Alex is taking me, in Mrs. Velder's car, to London Airport. We're calling at the Lennox Street office first. Can you put a tail on?"

"Can do," said Wilmot. "But why—"

He found himself talking to a dead telephone. Jane had gone.

It was half past five by the time they reached Lennox Street. While Alex was inside, Jane looked cautiously round to see if Wilmot had been as good as his word. She could see a small green van, apparently delivering parcels at the far end of the road, but nothing else. By six o'clock, with dusk coming up, they were across Kew Bridge, and had joined the tail end of the home-going traffic on the Twickenham Road.

"Quicker this way," said Alex, "until they've finished messing about with the flyover on the Great West Road. Trouble is, everyone else knows it too. Let's try a shortcut."

He swung expertly across the traffic and turned into a long road of neat houses, with neat gardens and neat cars in neat garages. At the far end of the road the street lamps petered out and they came to a halt in an area of empty lots and high fences.

"It's a dead end," said Jane.

"Not the last time I came here, it wasn't," said Alex. "Let's have a squint at the map. It's in the pocket."

As he leaned over her, she felt the needle go into her arm. For a moment she thought it was an accident—that a loose pin in Alex's coat might have stuck into her. Then she realized what had happened, and started to fight, but Alex was lying half on top of her, his thick leather driving glove feeling for her mouth.

A minute later the boy sat back in his seat, and relaxed cautiously. He had given her a full shot of pelandramine. She'd be out for an hour, and dopey for another hour after that. So there was no hurry.

He looked at himself in the driving mirror and was pleased with the unexcited face that looked back. He stripped off the driving gloves and felt his own pulse, timing it with his wrist watch. Eighty-four. Twelve faster than it should be, but not bad. He took out a comb and ran it through his hair.

Then he examined the girl. Her mouth was open and she was breathing noisily. Her cheeks were flushed. Anyone looking at her would think that she'd been drinking too much and had passed out. Just the ticket.

He felt in the right-hand door pocket and took out a small bottle gin. A few drops round her mouth and chin. A little on her dress. Enough for people to smell it, if he was stopped.

He opened the door. There was no one in sight. He threw the gin bottle and the empty hypodermic syringe over the fence, got back,

turned the car, and drove off slowly the way he had come.

The mist was thicker. At the Slough roundabout he took the Staines road, driving carefully now. He crossed Staines Bridge, following the Egham Road. At Egham the road forked. The main road, with its string of garages, its traffic, and its orange neon lighting, went away to the left. The right fork, a much smaller road, followed the river toward Windsor. In summer this road too would be crowded with traffic heading for the open spaces of Runnymede Meadow. Now, on a damp February night, it was empty.

Half a mile along, Alex turned out his headlights and drove very carefully off the road and onto the rough grass. There was some danger of getting the car bogged down, but his town and country studded tires would grip most surfaces. There was a worse danger. Somewhere ahead was the Thames, its bank unprotected by any fence.

Alex stopped the car, got out, and walked forward, counting his paces. It was fifty yards to the bank. He came back, climbed in, and drove the car forward cautiously in low gear.

When he stopped again, he was only five yards from the edge. At this point, where the bank curved, it had been reinforced with concrete bags against the sweep of the winter floods. A yard below his feet the river ran, cold, gray, and sleek.

Alex walked back to the car. Jane had slumped over sideways, so that when he opened the door she nearly fell out. He got his hands under her body and lifted her onto the wet grass.

Alone, islanded by the mist, touching the girl's body, moving it, arranging it, gave him a sense of power, near to exultation. He crouched beside her for a full minute to let the singing noise in his ears die down and the lights stop flashing in front of his eyes. Then he got up slowly, went round to the back of the car, opened the trunk compartment, and took out two fourteen-pound weights and a coil of odd-looking plaited cord.

With the cord he tied Jane's wrists together in front of her, passing the ends through the handles of the weights and knotting them.

When he stood up, he saw three pairs of yellow eyes looking at him through the mist. He thought, for a moment, that it was his imagination playing him tricks again. Then he heard the engines, growling to themselves, as the cars bumped across the grass in low gear, closing in on him from every side.

He bent quickly, hoisted the girl onto his shoulders, and walked to the bank.

A man's voice shouted urgently, and an orange spotlight flicked on. Alex humped his powerful shoulders, threw the girl ahead of him into the water, and jumped after her. While he was still in mid-air, a second body flashed past him.

Jane came up out of a tangle of nightmare, of darkness and cold, of lights and noises, into the reality of a hospital bed. The sun was slanting through the uncurtained window, and Sergeant Wilmot was perched on a chair beside her.

"Good morning," he said. "Are you ready to talk?"

"I'm all right," said Jane. "I'll get dressed, if you can find my clothes."

"The doctor says he'll let you out in a day or two, if you're good. Let's have the story."

She told him what she could remember, and Sergeant Wilmot wrote it down in his round schoolboy hand.

"I felt the needle go in my arm," she said. "I don't really know what happened after that."

"Alex took you in the car to Runnymede, and pitched you into the river. Having first tied a couple of weights onto you. I wonder how many of his girlfriends he's got rid of that way before?" He pulled a length of cord out of his pocket. "Simple, but you've got to hand it to him. It's clever. It's made of paper. Twenty or thirty separate strands of it, plaited tight together. Strong enough—but it'd melt after you'd been a day or two in the water."

Jane shuddered uncontrollably, and Sergeant Wilmot said, "I never had much tact," and put the cord away.

"Who pulled me out?"

"I did," said Wilmot. "It's the sort of thing you sometimes get a medal for. We were behind you all the way. If it hadn't been for the fog and the mess up on Staines Bridge we'd have been close enough to stop you going in the water."

"What's happened to Alex?"

"He's in the hospital at the Scrubs. In a private room. And that's where he's going to stay until Patrick gets back."

"Haven't we heard anything yet?"

"He's been off the air for nearly forty-eight hours. He'll turn up. Don't worry."

"Who said I was worrying?"

"You looked worried. Just for a moment."

Jane laughed and said, "If I'm going to be kept here, you can do something for me. Get me those photocopies of the diary pages and

a classified directory of London. I've had a hunch and I want to work it out."

When Wilmot had gone, she stretched luxuriously, and then settled down into the warm bed. She liked the way Wilmot called Petrella Patrick; and she wondered if she'd ever be able to do it herself. A minute later, she was asleep . . .

At eleven o'clock on the following morning the door of her room opened. Jane, who was deep in a street directory, her bed covered with slips of paper, said, "Put it down on the table, could you, nurse—" looked up, and saw that it was Petrella.

"Hello," she said.

"As soon as my back's turned," said Petrella, "you have to go and do a damn silly thing like that."

"Listen to who's talking," said Jane. "What have you been up to? And what's wrong with your leg?"

"Someone tried to run me over. I rolled down a bank onto a railway."

"Well, I fell into a river. That's not much worse."

They both laughed. Petrella sat down on the end of the bed, and said, "You know why they had to shut your mouth, don't you."

"Something about those books. I couldn't work it out."

"Listen, and I'll tell you. In 1951 two men were sentenced at the Exeter assizes for assaulting a bank manager. One was our friend Jerry Light of Islington. The other was one of the managing directors of the demolition firm he worked for. A man called Alwyn Corder, who disappeared so completely that even Sergeant Edwards couldn't trace him. Because the simple explanation eluded us all. When Corder came out of prison, *he changed his name to Velden*. All legal and aboveboard, by deed poll, registered in the High Court. I checked it this morning. And in that name, he married Constantia Marchant, Douglas Marchant's sister. It was a business alliance. Douglas was his fellow director in the demolition firm."

"I see," said Jane. "Yes, I see." A lot of tiny pieces were falling into place, and a certain pattern was appearing.

"There's a lot that isn't clear yet," said Petrella. "But the outline's there. Douglas Marchant and Alwyn Corder, his brother-in-law, now known as Kenneth Velden, and their old foreman Jerry Light are the three people who started this racket, and ran it. That's for sure. Then Velden died. The other two couldn't simply hang on to his share. They paid it over to his widow."

"Then Douglas is head of the whole affair?"

"It's got to be proved."

"And it would help to prove it if you could show that he was still keeping in touch with Jerry Light?"

Petrella grinned, and said, "Cough it up."

"Cough *what* up?"

"Whatever it is you've discovered."

"All right. It's this diary you found in Light's desk. The entries are meeting places—they're pubs. *Rsg Sn* is the Rising Sun. *Wdmn* is the Woodman, and so on. The letter and numbers after the pub are the postal district, and the last number's the time of day. That's what first made me think they must be pubs, because the times are all between eleven and two, or six and ten."

Petrella got up, and stood for a long moment staring down her.

Then he said, "That's very good indeed," limped across to the door, and went quietly out, shutting the door behind him.

"Douglas Marchant," said Petrella to Baldwin, "makes windows. The windows go into new buildings all over England. In nearly all big building projects the subcontractors get paid on the same day in the month. Therefore there must be a lot of money in the main contractor's bank the day before. That's how the intelligence system works. When the bank has been chosen, a gang of specialist safebreakers do the actual work. Jerry Light gives them their instructions, and their kit. And his men collect the appropriate rake-off after the job's over. That's what the Franks brothers were waiting for, in Slough, that morning."

"How are we going to prove all this?"

"If we could get one of Jerry Light's boys to sing, he *might* give us Light. If we hooked Light, he *might* give us Marchant."

"You don't sound very hopeful."

"They're going to be a tough bunch to drive that sort of wedge into. They've been working together too long, and they know each other too well."

"Have you any better ideas?"

"Yes," said Petrella slowly. "I have an idea, but it's so irregular that we're going to need all the backing the A.C. can give us. First, I want Jerry Light's phone tapped."

Baldwin made a face. "You know what they think about that, don't you. Anything else?"

"That's just a start," said Petrella. "The next really is a bit hot. Now, listen—"

At London Airport the loudspeaker in the arrival lounge said, "We have a message for Mr. Douglas Marchant, believed to be traveling from Dortmund. Would Mr. Marchant report to the reception desk."

Douglas hesitated for a long moment.

If things really had started to happen, might it not be wisest to turn straight round and take the next airplane back to Germany?

He rejected the idea as soon as it occurred to him. It was by abandoning careful, prearranged plans and acting on the impulse of blind panic that people gave themselves away and got caught. He marched firmly up to the reception desk and smiled at the girl behind it.

He produced his passport. "I understand you have a message for me."

"Mr. Douglas Marchant? Would you telephone this number? You can use the telephone in the office, if you wish."

"Thank you," said Douglas. He dialed the number, which he recognized as his sister Constantia's.

"Douglas. Thank heavens, you're back. I didn't know where to get hold of you, so I had to leave a message at the airport."

"What's happened?"

"Alex and Jane Orfrey have both disappeared. And they've taken the car with them."

"When did this happen?"

"Two nights ago. I've been so worried."

"You've told the police."

"Of course. But they've done nothing. They even suggested—" Douglas heard his sister choke—"that they might have eloped together."

"I suppose it's possible."

"Don't be absurd. Alex was a chauffeur—a mechanic—"

"And Jane was your secretary."

"That's different. She was a girl of a good family."

Douglas was about to say something flippant when he realized that his sister was upset; and being upset, might do something stupid.

"I'll make some inquiries," he said. "I'll ring you back as soon as I have any news for you."

As soon as he had rung off, he dialed another number. The girl who answered the telephone said, "Who's that? Mr. Wilberforce. I'll see if Mr. Simmons is in." And a few seconds later, "No, I'm sorry. He's just gone out. Can I get him to ring you back?"

"Don't bother," said Douglas. "When he does come back, would you give him a message. Tell him that I got the letter he sent me on the third of March."

"Right char," said the girl.

As soon as she had rung off, she walked through to the inner office, and said, "That was Mr. Wilberforce, Mr. Simmons. You did say you weren't in if he telephoned."

"That's what I said," agreed Mr. Simmons, a short, sharp-looking man in thick bifocals. "And that's what I meant. Did he leave a message?"

"He just said that he got the letter you sent on the third of March."

"You're sure he said the third of March?"

"I'm not deaf yet," said the girl.

"All right," said Mr. Simmons. "Plug a line through to this telephone, and you can go to lunch."

"Tisn't lunchtime."

"Then go and buy yourself a new hat."

Mr. Simmons listened until he heard the outer door shut, drew the telephone toward himself, and dialed an Islington number.

Jerry Light, who answered the telephone, said, "You're sure it was the third of March he said? All right. Thanks very much," and rang off. He opened the drawer of his desk, extracted the diary that lay there, and opened it at the first week of March.

Then he looked at his watch. It was just after twelve. He crammed a hat on his head, went down the outside staircase into the yard, said, "Watch things, Sammy. I'm going out," to the shaggy young man who was sawing a length of timber, and set off at a brisk pace. He seemed to be walking haphazardly, choosing small empty streets. But his course was steadily northeast.

One o'clock was striking when he went through the door of a small public house in the neighborhood of Hackney Downs, said, "Watcher, Len," to the landlord, and walked through the serving area into the private room behind.

Douglas Marchant was sitting in front of the fire, nursing a glass of whisky. He indicated another glass, ready poured, which stood on the table.

Light said, "Ta," took a drink, and added, "I take it you saw the news."

"That's why I came back from Germany. All the papers said was that Alex got out of the hospital at the Scrubs yesterday morning and clean away. No details. It mightn't be true."

"It's true all right," said Light. "He telephoned me this morning." Marchant's lip went up. "At your place?"

"No. He had sense enough not to do that. He got me through Shady Simmons."

"Did he tell you how he got picked up?"

"He thinks it was just bad luck. A police patrol car spotted him tipping the girl into the river."

"I don't believe in bad luck like that," said Marchant. "Do you?"

"Not really," said Light. "I think they're moving in on us."

"What did Alex want?"

"A place to hide out in. He spent last night on the Embankment. And for you to get him out of the country."

"Or what?"

"So far, he's kept his mouth shut. If he did decide to talk, he could tell them a hell of a lot they want to know."

Marchant drank a little more whisky. "We'll have to do something about him," he said. "The only place he'd be safe would be in East Germany."

"I can think of somewhere that'd be a damned sight safer," said Jerry.

A red coal dropped from the fire. The clock on the mantelshelf ticked. In the bar, Douglas could hear the landlord saying, "Nice sort of a day for March." He had said it to every customer who came in.

Douglas finished his drink and got up. He said, "I think you're right. We're going to pack up this lark soon. We don't want any loose ends. I've got to go and hold my sister's hand—she's having hysterics. We'll go out the back way."

As the two men emerged from the alleyway, a girl approached them. She had a collector's tray of little red and white flowers. "For the Cottage Hospital," she said. She was a nice-looking girl. Douglas felt in his pocket, found half a crown, dropped it in her tin, and said, "Keep the flower. You can sell it again."

The girl said, "Thank you, sir." Douglas noticed that she had an outsize flower with a black center pinned onto the shoulder of her dress.

At nine o'clock that night Jerry Light left his flat in Albany Street and walked to the garage where he parked his car. The attendant said, "She ought to be all right now."

In the act of getting into the car, Light paused, "What do you mean, now?"

"Now the distributor head's been fixed."

"I didn't tell you to do that."

"It wasn't us. The man came round from the makers with it. He fixed it himself."

"Oh," said Light. "Yes. Of course. I'd forgotten about that. He fixed it, did he? Come to think of it, I won't be needing the car just now. I've changed my mind."

He left the garage, hailed a taxi, and was driven through Regent's Park to Clarence Gate. Here he dismissed the taxi. Five minutes' quick walk brought him to a row of garages in a cul-de-sac behind Baker Street station.

Light was tolerably sure that no one knew about his second car. It was a new MG Magnette, with a capacious trunk compartment in which he had stored two bulging suitcases and a carryall. He had rented the garage in another name, had installed the car in it three months before, and had not visited it since.

The only trouble was that it was now raining so hard that it was difficult to keep observation as he walked. He didn't think anyone was following him, but was not quite sure.

He backed the car out and drove slowly into the park, which he proceeded to circle twice. Headlights showed, blurred by the rain, in his mirror. Cars overtook him. Cars passed him. At the end of the second circuit he was reasonably happy, turned out of the park at Gloucester Gate, and headed north.

"He's making it damned difficult for us," said Wilmot into his car wireless. "I wish he'd used his first car. I'd got that fixed nicely. All we'd have had to do then would be sit back and track him on the radio repeater. Over."

"Count your blessings," said Petrella into his wireless. "If it wasn't raining so damned hard, he'd probably have spotted us long ago. Over and out."

Jerry Light drove steadily up Highgate Hill, across the North Circular Road, and on toward Barnet. His plan was very simple. He was not a believer in elaboration. His instructions to Alex had been to come by Underground to High Barnet and then to walk out onto the main North Road and along it for a quarter of a mile, past the golf course, timing himself to get to the point where the road forked by eleven o'clock. Alex was to come alone, and make damned sure he wasn't followed.

Light looked at his watch. He was in nice time. Five minutes to eleven, and that was High Barnet station on the right. The rain was coming down like steel rods. Alex must be getting very wet.

Light followed the main road past the Elstree fork. There was very little traffic. A couple of London-bound cars came toward him over the long swell of the hill. There was nothing behind him as far as he could see.

His headlights picked out Alex standing by the roadside.

Light crawled to a stop beside him. Leaning across, he turned down the far side window. He used his left hand to do this. His right hand was resting on the floor of the car.

"That you, Jerry?" said Alex. "I'm damned wet."

"It's me," said Light. He brought up his right hand, and shot Alex twice through the chest at pointblank range.

Alex jerked back on to his heels, went down to his knees, and fell forward, his face in the water that was cascading down the gutter.

Resting his forearm on the ledge of the window, Light took careful aim, and shot again.

The repeated detonations had deafened him, and he could hear nothing. The first thing he noticed was that headlights, backed by a powerful spotlight, had come on behind him. He slammed the car into gear, almost lifting it off the ground as he drove it forward.

A siren sounded.

The car behind him was almost on top of him. Light saw, out of the corner of his eye, a minor road to the left, swerved sharply, and went into a skid.

On a dry surface it would have come off, but the wet macadam was like ice. Instead of correcting at the end of the skid, the car swung wildly out of control, went through the fence, wires twanging like harp strings, turned, once, right over, and smacked into the concrete base of a pylon, dislocating two of the overhead lines and plunging half of High Barnet into darkness and confusion.

So Petrella came for a second time into the presence of Assistant Commissioner Romer, and came with the consciousness of failure heavy on him.

"I reckoned," he said, "that if we let Alex go, they'd be in a cleft stick. Either they left him in the lurch, in which case he'd split. Or they helped him, and we caught them red-handed. Now Alex is dead, and Light's dead, and we're further off than ever from proving any connection between the crooks who do the work, and the man at the top, who draws the big profits."

"Douglas Marchant."

"Yes, sir. I've no doubt in my own mind that he's the man who

founded the organization, and who runs it."

"It's not just what's in your mind," said Romer. "There's a good deal of concrete evidence, too. That was a nice photograph our girl collector with the flowers got of him, talking to Light, outside the pub."

"He could explain that, sir. He's in windows. Light's a builder. It could have been an ordinary business chat."

"Light's a criminal," said Romer, "a man who committed a cold-blooded murder a few hours after meeting Marchant secretly at an out-of-the-way public house. I don't doubt that he could explain the coincidence. Most things can be explained, if you try hard enough. Here's another one. Two days ago, Marchant went across to Germany. He visited your old friend, the Baron von der Hulde und Oberath. They had a long talk. The German police have got a man in the packing department. He saw Marchant coming and going, and is prepared to identify him. Last night there was a fire at the factory."

"A fire!"

"Nothing serious. It broke out in the dispatch department, and destroyed all records of dispatches during the last five years."

"I see," said Petrella.

"It's particularly intriguing because our man remembers, four or five days ago, helping to pack and dispatch a drill—to a place called Fyledean Court, near Lavenham, in Wiltshire."

"Did you say a *drill*, sir?"

"Curb your excitement. It wasn't a drill for drilling holes in metal plates. It was a drill for planting seed potatoes. Curious, all the same, that the dispatch records should have been destroyed immediately afterwards."

"It's going to be even more difficult to prove anything now."

"There's one rule I always follow," said Romer. "When you get a smack in the eye, don't sit down. Get up and counterattack at once. I spoke to the chief constable of Wiltshire before you came in. He's promised to cooperate with you in every way."

"Cooperate in what, sir?" said Petrella blankly.

"You're going down with the search warrant which I've secured for you, and you're going to turn Fyledean Court upside down."

"But—" said Petrella.

"But what, inspector?"

"If I *don't* find anything, isn't there going to be the most awful row?"

"I'm prepared to accept that risk," said Romer coldly. "He

shouldn't have tried to have my niece drowned. I'm rather fond of her."

Petrella drove, while Wilmot read the map.

"We'll go down to Christchurch first," he said.

"I thought we were going to Lavenham."

"We're going to call on Mr. Wynne."

"Who's Mr. Wynne, when he's at home?"

"Mr. Wynne," said Petrella, "was, until he retired, the manager of the Exeter branch of the District Bank."

"The old boy Light and Corder assaulted."

"That's right," said Petrella. "That's where this story began. I want to hear about it, before we tackle Douglas."

It was a lovely day. The early March sun was bright, but not yet very warm. Spring was round the corner, waiting for its cue.

Wilmot abandoned the map and said, "To hell with it! You know what? You ought to do something about Jane."

"Which Jane?" said Petrella, but the car had swerved a full foot to the right before he corrected it.

"Is there more than one?" said Wilmot innocently. "I mean Jane Orfrey, the girl detective, the pride of the Women Police. The one I pulled out of the river a week ago."

"What do you suggest I ought to do about her?"

"You could always marry her. If worse came to the worst, I mean."

Petrella drove in silence for nearly a quarter of a mile, and Wilmot, who knew him better than most people, began to kick himself for having presumed.

At last Petrella said, "I've never proposed to a girl. I wouldn't know how to start."

"Don't worry," said Wilmot, relieved. "It's all a matter of technique. You get in front of her, and work your feet up till you're pretty close. Then you distract her attention—and grab her with both hands. Under the arms, high up, is a favorite—"

"You make it sound like unarmed combat."

"It is a bit like that. Mind you, you'll find Jane's got a pretty high standard, now she's been kissed by a real expert."

"What expert?"

"Me," said Wilmot. "When I pulled her out of the water, I had to use the kiss-of-life technique. Smashing. It'll probably go better still when she's conscious—"

"Certainly I remember Marchant and Corder," said Mr. Wynne. "It's such a beautiful morning. Let's step out into the garden. I have good cause to remember," he went on. "One of my ribs never really mended. I get a sharp twinge there if I stoop suddenly. Particularly when the weather is cold."

He was one of those men who look old when they are young, and young when they are old. The lines on his face were the deep lines of age, but his eyes had the brightness, his skin the pinkness, of youth. He's looked exactly like that, Petrella decided, for half a century; like a tough old tree.

"I read all about the assault those two men made on you," Petrella said, "but what interested me most was the suggestion that your refusal to grant this company credit was based on some sort of personal feeling."

"Personal feeling?" Mr. Wynne drew his lips in sharply, then puffed them out again like a goldfish after an ant's egg. "They must have imagined that. Bank managers aren't allowed much personal discretion. All substantial overdrafts are referred to Area."

"But in this case it was suggested that you refused to recommend credit because of some sort of quarrel."

"If there was a quarrel," said Mr. Wynne, "it was very one-sided." He stared up at an airplane, from Hurn on the cross-Channel run, which was gaining height in a leisurely circle against the pale blue-green sky. "I can remember the managing director—his name was Marchant, and he'd been in the air force—coming to see me in my office one morning. I hadn't quite made up my mind what I was going to recommend. He wanted a very large credit, but he had reasonable security, and the company had quite a good financial record. When I said that I should need time to think about it, he got very angry." A slight smile played across the corners of Mr. Wynne's mouth. "Very angry indeed. He said that I'd promised him the credit and that I must let him have it."

"And had you?"

"Of course not," said Mr. Wynne. "Are you fond of tomatoes?"

They had drifted to the bottom of the garden. Along the fence which separated the garden from the recreation ground was quite a pretentious greenhouse. The far side was covered with wire netting.

"I have trouble with the children throwing things," explained Mr. Wynne. "Children seem to be brought up without discipline today. I have forced some early Cardinal Joys—they're pentagrams,

of course. Would you like to try one?"

"No, thanks," said Petrella. "You were telling me about Marchant making a scene in your office."

"Yes. He lost his temper, and threatened me. I wasn't impressed."

"When you say he threatened you—do you mean physically?"

"I thought at one moment that he was going to strike me. He went very red, jumped to his feet, and came round to my side of the desk." Mr. Wynne blinked.

"And what did you do?"

"I told him to control himself. After a while he did so, and went away."

"And after that you decided not to recommend him for credit."

"If you mean that I nursed a grudge against him, you're quite mistaken. I shouldn't allow my personal feelings to enter into a matter like that. It did, of course, occur to me that a man who had so little control over himself might not be the safest person to conduct a business. That big fellow there is an Ecbalium Agreste, or squirting cucumber—"

"Pickled gherkins," said Wilmot to Petrella as they drove northward to keep a midday rendezvous with the chief constable. "Are all bank managers like that?"

"They tend to clothe themselves in the armor of their own rectitude," said Petrella. "But I should think Mr. Wynne is an extreme specimen."

"No wonder Marchant blew his top. Old Wynne would have saved the banks a few shocks in the last seven years if he'd been a bit more tactful with him, wouldn't he?"

It was nearly four o'clock when they first caught sight of Fyledean Court. They had taken the Tilshead road, across the wastelands that form the central hump of Salisbury Plain. Then they had dropped down off the escarpment, leaving behind them the barren acres of the Firing Range, back to the civilization of the Lavenham Valley. It was like coming out of war into peace.

Fyledean Court lay at the head of a long, curving, shallow valley. A private approach road ran north from the Lavenham-Devizes road through unfenced fields of stubble, sloping up to a windbreak of black and leafless trees.

At the turn of the road Petrella stopped the car.

"You walk from here," he said to Wilmot. "Keep out of sight over the crest, and work your way in from behind. Pick up anything you can, while I keep 'em busy in front."

He gave Wilmot five minutes' start, then drove slowly down the road to the Court, and rang the bell. A grayhaired woman answered the door, inquired his name in a broad Wiltshire accent, and showed him into a room which might have been a gunroom or a library according to its owner's tastes. There were a lot of bookshelves, but very few books; a clutter of catalogues, boxes of cartridges, bottles of linseed oil, and tins of saddlesoap.

He sat there for nearly ten minutes, listening to the life of the house and farm going on around him. A heavy truck drove up, discharged some load, and drove off again. Then Douglas Marchant came in. "My housekeeper tells me that you're a policeman."

"Well—" began Petrella cautiously.

"Does that mean I can't offer you a drink?"

"There's no rule about it, but actually I won't have one just now."

"You don't mind if I do," said Marchant, and opened the large closet beside the fireplace. There were box files on the lower shelves, and a decanter and some bottles and glasses higher up.

Marchant helped himself to whisky, put in a long splash of soda, and said, "Well now."

Both men were standing.

Petrella said, "I'm a detective inspector attached to New Scotland Yard. We've been investigating a number of bank robberies, which seemed to us to be connected—possibly organized by the same people."

"They're smart operators," said Marchant. "I've read about them in the papers."

"And I have a warrant to search your house."

Exactly the correct reactions, Petrella observed. Incredulity, followed by anger, followed by an affection of ridicule. But then, he had had ten minutes to think it all out.

"If it isn't a joke," said Marchant, "and you really do suspect me of being connected with these—these bank robberies—would you spare a few minutes telling me why? If this house is full of—er—stolen goods—they'll still be here in ten minutes' time. Incidentally, I suppose that's one of your men I spotted, leaning over the gate at the back."

Petrella said, "Did you know a man named Light?"

"Jerry Light? Certainly. He was my squadron sergeant major during the war, and came in with me when I started a demolition and scrap metal business after the war."

"Have you seen him since?"

"I see him whenever we happen to work on the same contracts."

He supplies labor. I supply windows."

"When did you see him last?"

"Two days ago—in London."

"Why did you meet him in an out-of-the-way public house, and not at his office?"

"I do much more of my work in public houses than in offices."

"I don't suppose you met Baron von der Hulde in a public house?"

Marchant looked surprised. "You keep dodging about," he complained. "I thought we were talking about poor old Jerry."

"Poor old Jerry," said Petrella softly.

"You must know—he was killed—a motor smash. The night before last."

"I knew," said Petrella. "I was wondering how you did. It hasn't been in the newspapers."

"One of his employees told a business friend of mine. These things get round very quickly in the trade."

"I'm sure they do," said Petrella. "Does everybody in the building trade also know that if Light hadn't been killed, he would have been charged with murder?"

Marchant stood up, his face went red and he said, "If that's a joke, it's in poor taste. I've told you, Light was a friend of mine—"

"So was the man he shot. Alex Shaw."

"Alex—"

"Or am I wrong? Wasn't it you who found Alex the job as chauffeur to your sister Constantia?"

"Certainly. But—"

"Into whose hands, incidentally, quite a few stolen banknotes seem to have found their way."

"You're confusing me," said Marchant. "And you're going much too fast. You talk about Jerry Light, and the Baron von der Hulde, and my sister Constantia, and her chauffeur Alex, and stolen banknotes. Are you telling me that Alex was a bank robber?"

"Alex was a very rare bird," said Petrella. "One half of his mind was occupied with what he was saying. The other half was noticing that Marchant was still standing up, and had put down his empty whisky glass on the table. "He was a professional killer. Not just a muscle man, like Franks and Stoker and the other simple hooligans Light employed to run your dirty business for you."

"My business?"

"Yes. *Your* business. And that's really the oddest twist in the whole affair. Because, as far as I can see, you made bank robbery your business from motives of personal spite. You once had a good

legitimate business, and a bank killed it, so you decided to get your own back on all banks."

Marchant walked over to the closet, which still stood half open, took out the decanter, poured himself out a second whisky, and then said politely, "Please go on."

"There's not a lot more to it. You were well placed, of course. As a demolition expert you knew all there was to be known about cutting through brickwork and steel. Light, I imagine, was your contact with the professional criminal element. You supplied the equipment, mostly from Germany, organized the whole show, and took—" Petrella's eye wandered round the room for a moment—"I would guess, a very handsome share of the profits."

Marchant said, "Is that your curtain line? I'm sorry. Really I am. I haven't met anything more fascinating since I stopped reading comics. Now—get on with your search, apologize, and be off with you."

The door opened, and Wilmot looked in.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said. "But I thought you ought to have this at once," and he thrust a piece of paper into Petrella's hand.

Petrella read it and said, "Thank you, sergeant. Don't go away." And to Marchant, "That potato drill *that's just been delivered*. When you declared it at the customs, did you tell them about the other piece of machinery?"

"What other piece?"

"Sergeant Wilmot hasn't had time to make a close examination, but he says that there appears to be a second piece of machinery screwed to the framework, inside the larger piece, and painted to resemble it. It looks like a high-speed metal drill. Curious requirement for a farmer."

"If there is, I know nothing about it."

"It would be an excellent way of bringing stuff into the country. You'd need some cooperation from the German manufacturer, of course."

"On a level," said Marchant, "with your other fairy stories." But he was sweating.

He's getting ready to jump, thought Petrella. But which way? There are two of us here, now. I'm nearer the window. Wilmot's between him and the door.

"If you'd care to look at the declaration I made to the customs—" He opened the closet door, and took out one of the box files. The whole of the back of the closet hinged inward. Marchant went through it, and slammed the door behind him.

Petrella jumped at the same moment, but he was a fraction of a second too late. The closet door was shut, and immovable.

"Out into the passage," he said.

Wilmot grabbed the handle, and pulled, but the door held fast. The mechanism at the back of the closet must have bolted the passage door as well.

"Damn it," said Petrella. "He had that lined up, didn't he?" As he spoke, he was looking round for a weapon. There was a poker in the grate, but it was too small to be much use. He opened another closet and found a twelve-bore gun in it. He made sure that it was unloaded, then grabbed it by the barrel and swung the butt at the window.

It was a narrow, leaded casement, and it took five minutes to beat an opening through it. Wilmot went first, and dragged Petrella after him. As they reached the farmyard they heard the airplane, and saw it taxiing out of the Dutch barn two hundred yards away.

"It's a Piper Aztec," said Wilmot. "Lovely little job. I spotted her as I came in. Take off and land on a tennis court."

"We ought to have thought of that," said Petrella. "With his record—an airplane was the obvious thing."

They could only stand and watch. The silver toy swung round, nose into the wind; a sudden burst of power, and it was away.

"We'll try the telephone, but I don't mind betting it's disconnected. The whole thing was laid out like a military operation. He went twice to that closet. Twice, *in front of my eyes*, to put me off my guard."

The plane was circling to gain height, and swung back almost overhead.

"Once he gets to Germany we can whistle for him. Come on."

Wilmot didn't seem to hear him. He was still staring after the dwindling plane. "He won't get to Germany," he said. "I emptied the main tank. There'll be enough in the starter tank and Autovac to get him airborne. He'll be lucky if he gets as far as the coast."

The dipping sun touched the starboard wingtip of the plane, and a tiny spark of light winked back at them.

Petrella cut out the clipping from the *New Forest Advertiser*, and pasted it carefully into the scrapbook.

UNEXPLAINED FATALITY

The Piper Aztec two-seater aircraft, registration G/XREZ, which crashed on Tuesday evening at Christchurch has

now been identified. The pilot, who died in the crash, was Wing Commander Marchant, D.S.O., D.F.C., of Fyledean Court, who has been farming in the Devizes locality for some years. Wing Commander Marchant was a popular figure locally and a generous contributor to all Service charities.

The cause of the accident has not yet been ascertained, but eyewitness accounts speak of the engine having cut out, which would suggest a mechanical defect or fuel stoppage. The pilot was evidently trying to land the aircraft on the local recreation ground. Tragically, he failed in the attempt by a few yards only, and crashed in the back garden of a Christchurch resident, Mr. Alfred Wynne, a retired bank official. Mr. Wynne's extensive tomato and cucumber house was entirely demolished.

This appeared the same day Petrella announced his engagement to Jane Orfrey.

SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":

At first Marquard was inclined to agree with the butler in accepting the scullion boy's explanation of the origin of the fire. It then occurred to him that the inflammability of cobwebs was something that sounded reasonable, but might not actually be true. Being uncertain, he withdrew to a neighboring house and touched a match to some old cobwebs, thereby learning what few people know: that cobwebs are not inflammable, although they look so. They merely shrivel up when touched by a flame.

As soon as this fact was established, the boy's whole circumstantial story was open to doubt. It then seemed to Marquard that it could have proceeded only from a very secretive and cunning mind—and that it was probable that the boy had pyromaniacal tendencies.

The boy confessed when sternly questioned by Marquard, and was later convicted and confined to an asylum for the criminally insane.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Illustration by Patricia Olsad

Back in September of 1989, I bemoaned the fact that Joseph Hansen's detective, Dave Brandstetter, was threatening to retire. Well, never fear, Dave is back, out of retirement and on his own in **The Boy Who Was Buried This Morning** (Viking, \$16.95, 174 pp). Cecil Harris, Brandstetter's lover, clues Dave into some suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of a man named Vaughan Thomas. Dave discovers that Thomas was not very well liked, not wholly unexpected since Thomas was a racist and bigot who had been a member of a white-supremacist and survivalist group in the backcountry of California. What gets Dave involved is the disappearance of Thomas's girlfriend and her son and the death by suicide of Kaminsky, the manager of the apartment complex where they all lived. Brandstetter is in fine, if older, form as he investigates the history of Thomas, his family, and his affiliations with the survivalist camp.

Death of a Salesperson: and Other Untimely Exits (Scribners, \$16.95, 200 pp) provides the reader with sixteen of Robert Barnard's witty short stories. Ranging from the plotting of the murder of a spouse ("A Little Breakfast Television") to a terrorist kidnapping gone terribly wrong ("Just Another Kidnap"), Barnard manages to turn what might be just ordinary little events into bizarre little crimes. This collection of short stories works particularly well for fans of O. Henry and Hitchcock.

Bill Crider has brought back his English professor/detective—Carl Burns—in **Dying Voices** (St. Martin's, \$14.95, 196 pp). Carl has two major problems this semester: the pigeons in the attic above his office are contributing a significant amount of solid waste (and not just feathers) to the contents of his office, and he has been assigned by the new president of Hartley Gorman College, Pecan City, Texas, to run a seminar on the works of a distinguished former professor. The problems escalate when pigeons begin to drop from the sky around Pecan City as if some horrible plague has struck and when the subject of the seminar is found dead in his motel room. Burns investigates both events while administering the English department and teaching an occasional class. Things really heat up when more bodies (both pigeon and human) begin to appear, this time in Burns's office. A humorous academic mystery that will strike a chord of recognition in those who have taught at a small town college.

M. K. Wren's series about the Nez Perce halfbreed, Conan Flagg, bookstore owner and "intelligence" expert, is now being reprinted. In **Oh, Bury Me Not** (Ballantine, \$3.50, 245 pp), Flagg returns to the desert country of Oregon to investigate the death of an old friend and the feud that seems to have precipitated it. Flagg uses his ranching background to investigate the roots of the feud and the death to discover several motives for murder, rustling and water rights not least among them.

Gillian Roberts has a second Amanda Pepper book, **Philly Stakes** (Scribners, \$17.95, 218 pp), while the first, **Caught Dead in Philadelphia**, is now out in paper (Ballantine, \$3.50, 201 pp). In both, schoolteacher Amanda is embroiled in murder investigations, and both murders are connected with her job at Philadelphia Prep. In *Caught Dead in Philadelphia*, a fellow teacher comes to see Amanda, for the first time and for no definable reason. And then is murdered in Amanda's apartment. It is here she meets C. K. Mackenzie, the homicide cop who suspects her of the murder. So she snoops to prove to Mackenzie that she is innocent, and she solves the crime. She isn't suspected of the murder of a parent in *Philly Stakes*; she had spent the night with Mackenzie. But that doesn't stop her from investigating to remove the blame from two troubled students.

The Mother Shadow by Melodie Johnson Howe (Viking, \$16.95, 263 pp) gives us Maggie Hill, temporary secretary, whose boss is murdered after writing a codicil to his will, leaving a valuable coin collection to private investigator Claire Conrad. When

Maggie loses the codicil, she tells Conrad that the family is going to refuse to honor the wishes of their relative. In the course of the story, Maggie becomes the Archie Goodwin to Conrad's Nero Wolfe. Of particular interest are Conrad's eccentric dress and automobiles, her home (a cottage on the grounds of a condemned hotel in the Los Angeles hills), and her British butler/bodyguard. The latter not only can come across as a real heavy but also as a sexual interest in the series. An interesting first novel.

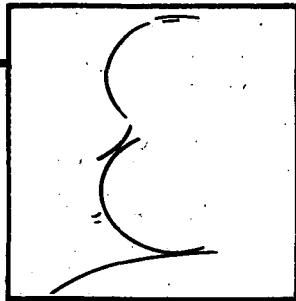
Another first novel is **Darkness Falls** by Joyce Anne Schneider (Pocket, \$17.95, 310 pp). Set in the well-to-do resort community of Grand Cove, Connecticut, *Darkness Falls* is a suspense novel which explores several unexplained deaths, all certified as accidental, and several seemingly unrelated thefts. Also central to the theme of this novel is the psychological well-being of Dr. Amanda Hammond, a psychiatrist who was raised in Grand Cove, whose mother was one of the suspicious "accidents" over twenty years before, and whose teenaged patient is found drowned very near where her mother died. Largely a "had-I-but-known" novel, but this book does set Amanda and her ex-boyfriend, medical examiner Peter Barron, on the detective trail.

Murder Under the Mistletoe by Jennifer Jordon (St. Martin's, \$16.95, 186 pp) follows history lecturer/mystery writer Barry Vaughn and his wife Dee to an exclusive resort for Christmas. They intend to rest while Barry finishes up his latest potboiler, but the murder of playgirl Miranda Travers keeps both Barry and Dee on their toes as they pry into the motives of the various guests installed at the resort. Classic English "country village" mystery.

Isabelle Holland, although an American by birth and residence, writes books with a British tone. Her latest is **A Fatal Advent** (Doubleday, \$16.95, 256 pp), the fifth in a series about Claire Aldington, psychotherapist, ordained Episcopal priest, and assistant rector at St. Anselm's in New York City. A visiting British dean is murdered at the parish house during the Advent season. While the actual investigation of the murder is performed by Lieutenant O'Neill of the NYPD, a series of petty thefts, the disappearance of Claire's teenaged son, a pair of anonymous threatening letters, and the initial suspicion that Claire's husband may be the murderer lead Claire into the investigation. Perhaps it's the religious nature of the story, although Anglican mysteries rarely, if ever, have female priests; or maybe it is the use of the language that makes me think of a British mystery, but I am sure that fans of the English cosy will enjoy this entry in the St. Anselm's series.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Internal Affairs is the first Hollywood effort from British director Michael Figgis, previously known for his moody 1988 film noir, *Stormy Monday*. He continues to show a flair for creating a mix of thick atmosphere and characters so intense that they threaten to leap off the screen. But the downside of an otherwise enjoyable technique is the ease in which it overshadows the convoluted story line of this picture.

Basically, we see a good cop pitted against a bad cop, and while the question of which one will triumph is relatively predictable, a number of other questions are explored along the way.

Just what unlawful deeds has bad cop Dennis Peck done? And what are their ramifications? Peck, played by a fabulously on-edge Richard Gere, is "one of the most productive cops on the force," but some of his ac-

tivities are suspicious enough to raise at least one eyebrow on the force.

Andy Garcia plays the good cop, Sergeant Raymond Avila, who has just been promoted to the Los Angeles Police Department's Internal Affairs Division—"the cops of the cops," says his commanding officer. "We set the tone for the whole department."

Unfortunately, it appears that it's bad-boy Peck who is setting the tone for the whole department. He wields an inordinate amount of influence over his fellow officers, many of whom seem to owe him favors, which he banks away. And when he feels the heat of Avila's investigation, he is happy to call in the markers. The result is a stone wall of silence to IAD's questions.

Officer Peck is also obsessed with women. He's been married three or four times; his current

wife is pregnant with his ninth child. He sleeps around, with prostitutes, ex-wives, other men's wives, his own wife—whomever. He's proud of it. And manipulates them and others through them to feed his own megalomania.

Working with Avila is a dour-faced Sergeant Amy Wallace (Laurie Metcalf), an IAD veteran and a lesbian. Apparently her sexuality is brought into the story as a comment on Peck's treatment of women, or all men's treatment of women. But it simply confuses, and appears gratuitous when Avila's wife comes to think he's sleeping with his partner and he must explain to her why it is less than likely.

Through Peck's clever psychological gameplaying, Avila in turn believes the rogue cop is sleeping with Avila's wife (Nancy Travis). This enrages the buttoned-down investigator, who descends from being an upscale, progressive-minded modern man and turns into a macho man ready to go *mano a mano* with his enemy. He drinks tequila from the bottle, pounds the streets of East Los Angeles—El Barrio—and spends time with a Spanish-speaking cousin who owns a bar on those mean streets. Suddenly the film is scored with flamenco-style guitar music. These

scenes conjure up stereotypes, but they do manage to draw the viewer deeper into the movie, into wondering what will happen next.

Naturally enough, Peck's peccadilloes lead to his downfall. When one of his many women discovers that he may be behind the execution-style murder of an elderly couple, she contacts Avila and Wallace and tells what she knows about his illegal schemes.

Richard Gere is completely wired in this role. He's set to go off at any moment, and he does. In a chase scene in which he is the prey, Gere gradually becomes scarier and scarier. Although he also is a lover in the film, he wouldn't be confused with the type of guy a girl would bring home to mom and dad.

Unfortunately, *Internal Affairs* degenerates in the final scene. We don't get a satisfying unraveling of mystery, nor is a believable motive provided for Peck's nefarious activities. Instead, we get a hackneyed diatribe against yuppies and an unbelievable speech from the bad cop about how much he loves his children. From this ending, one might conclude that Officer Peck went rotten in order to keep up with mammoth child support payments, but it comes across as silly.

THE STORY THAT WON

The January Mysterious by Mike Frees of Walnut mentions go to Gerald R. nia; Donald A. Yates of St. Guhin of Aberdeen, South of Gander, Newfoundland of Petersburg, Illinois; S. D. Scribner of Falls Church, Virginia; Robert G. Stewart of Oakland, California; Richard Kennedy of Naples, Florida; and Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia.



Photograph contest was won Creek; California. Honorable Marka of Whittier, California; Paula Helena, California; Paula Dakota; Christopher Leonard, Canada; Alice Ferguson, Virginia; Robert G. Stewart of Oakland, California; Richard Kennedy of Naples, Florida; and Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia.

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THE MOMMY'S CURSE by Mike Frees

"You're positive they're still on the island?" Lieutenant Alvarez pressed the patrol sergeant.

"Yes, sir. We had the bridge blocked within three minutes of the call from the museum. And Mr. Hopwell here," he added; indicating the museum curator, "says that the four men left on foot. They couldn't have reached the bridge in that time, and no one saw any boats or planes. They've gotta be here!"

"And yet," continued Alvarez, "they're not."

The sergeant shrugged. "We've combed the island, but no luck."

Alvarez turned to the curator. "What did they take, Mr. Hopwell?"

"A collection of thirty Egyptian game hoops, on loan from the Cairo Museum. Quite irreplaceable; a tragic loss!"

"Hoops?"

"Yes," Hopwell nodded, "about two feet in diameter, woven from reeds. They belonged to the children of the pharaoh Ramses II. They used them in games: ring toss, juggling; that sort of thing. They were quite popular in ancient Egypt. As the property of the pharaoh's children, these were considered sacred."

"I see." Alvarez was losing interest.

"Yes, the legend says that the pharaoh's wife placed a curse on anyone who took the hoops from her children."

"A curse?"

"Yes. Anyone stealing the hoops would be transformed."

"Transformed? Into what?" Alvarez was trying to think of a way to politely end the conversation.

"Into trees, I believe."

"Of course. Well, thank you, Mr. Hopwell," said Alvarez. He nodded to the sergeant. "Let's go outside, sergeant, and take one last look around."

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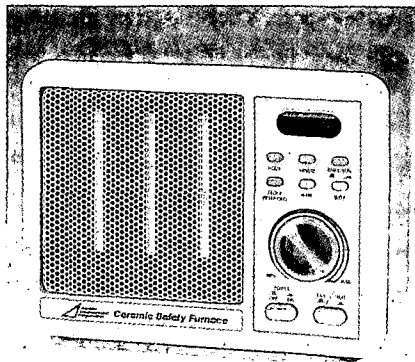
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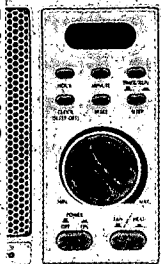
MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ FIGHT THE BIG CHILL



Be toasty warm whenever, wherever you want! The Timer, from Aladdin is the safe, compact, energy efficient 1500 watt ceramic heater that really does fight the big chill. Extremely safe (the heating element actually operates below the ignition point of tissue paper), the unit provides instant heat for any room. Plus, it is the only portable heater which features an easy to use programmable timer. So, you can set it once, and enjoy warm mornings while the unit runs for two hours, then shuts itself off. The ingenious "sleep" but-

ton lets you fall asleep in warmth, then shuts itself off in an hour. Compact (9"x7"x5") and lightweight, the Timer provides 2,250 BTU's of heat and features an automatic temperature sensor and a year round fan. The illuminated digital clock displays hour / minutes, and current settings. The automatic tipover safety switch is an added safety feature. So stop wasting energy and money warming rooms not in use, and fight the big chill with the safe, economical, Timer. UL listed. Manufacturer's 5 yr. limited warranty. **\$159.98** (\$10.00) #A1961.



◀ FOOD DEHYDRATOR



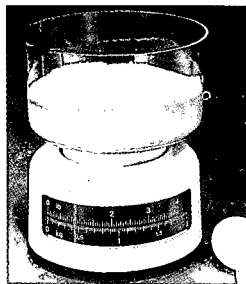
Even if it weren't so specially low-priced, this food dehydrator would be immensely economical. Using almost none of your valuable time, it makes nutritious, preservative-free, refined-sugar-free, *healthful* dried fruits and snacks, plus yogurt — at a tiny fraction of their price in stores. Simply slice fruit into lemon juice, spread on the perforated plastic stacking trays and forget it for 12 to 24 hours. With electrical coil at bottom, the unit is engineered for convection heating; no fan needed, so it's energy-efficient and noiseless. A 28-page instruction book provides guides for adjustable vents and timing plus enticing recipes. Treat kids to crispy banana chips, make dried apples, apricots, raisins, even beef jerky and vegetables for soups and camping trips... try zucchini slices with sesame seeds — a dieter's dream substitute for hi-cal chips. U.L. Listed. 5-tray Dehydrator (shown) **\$51.98** (\$6.25) #A1887X. 3-tray Dehydrator **\$41.98** (\$5.25) #A1886X.

▼ IT SWIVELS!

Backless "Back" Chairs have solved the age-old problem of proper seating, aligning the body on its natural axis so that sitting does not stress spine or back muscles. The redistribution of body weight is dramatically more freeing, natural, comfortable. But until now you had to give up mobility to sit this intelligently — these chairs were unidirectional and if you needed to change orientation you had the awkwardness of moving the whole chair. Finally it swivels! In its brand-new swivel incarnation, the Back Chair is suited for use at any work station, desk or table. The reinforced oak 4-star base has commercial-quality dual-track casters for easy maneuverability over carpets or floors. Effortless swivel action. Manual height adjustment. Gray poly-cotton fabric over plush cushion. This is a new twist on a good idea and until you use it you don't know how relaxed and productive you can be sitting down. The price is a nice turn too, only **\$79.98** (\$13.00) #A1816. Minimal assembly.



▼ ZERO RESET SCALE

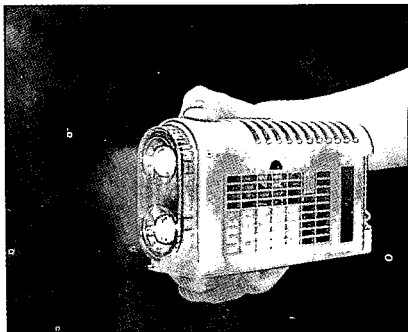


Convenience was costly until Mouli introduced this scale. Easiest to use. Now you do not have to keep emptying the bowl, just keep adding your ingredients and set the bottom back to zero. Has a 7 PD capacity.

Dishwasher safe. The bowl inverts over scale for easy storage. **\$19.98** (\$5.00) #A1904.

▼ AWAKE N' ESCAPE

This doubly useful smoke detector not only sounds the alarm, but can literally light the way to safety. Designed for the top of a door, its swingaway bracket with lock lever slips on doors up to 2". When combustion activates the alarm, a built-in double-beam flashlight comes on automatically — indicating the door's location. Then, one pull and the breakaway bracket releases the unit to serve as a portable flashlight. Use both at home and in hotel rooms; a packable 8½" x 5½" x 2¼". Dual-ionization-chamber type, with alarm test button and low-battery signal. Two 9-volt batteries included; 5-year ltd. warranty. **\$40.98** (\$5.00) #A1932.



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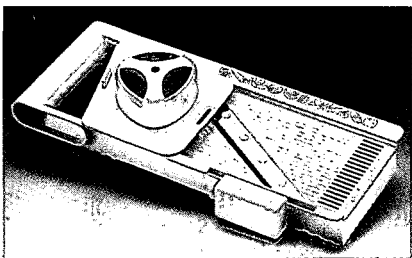
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► SOLVE A SLIPPERY PROBLEM

When it's bath time for baby, a parent needs to become an octopus. Now, Deluxe Baby Sitter™ helps to support a soapy, squirmy tot, while freeing your hands to wash, play and retrieve ducks and boats. (Actually, a loophole allows you to attach some toys to Baby Sitter.) Four large suction cups anchor high-impact polypropylene legs firmly to the bathtub; the support ring (11" diameter) has a special raised backrest. And, contributing to safety and comfort, is a Spongee Seat™ — a soft foam cushion that's contoured and slip-resistant. In yellow; recommended for ages 6 months and up. **\$15.98** (\$3.00) #A1800.



▼ VARIO SLICER



The vario adjustable slicer lets you slice all your foods in a snap. You control the thickness of the slices. Sure grip handle lets you slice without playing your fingers. Made of ABS Plastic, blade is made of stainless steel and is dishwasher safe. **\$25.98** (\$4.25) #A1948.

▼ TALKING ALARM CLOCK

Tired of waking up to an annoying buzz? Why not awake to a crowing rooster and time report! Our battery operated talking alarm clock announces the hour and gives the time with the push of a button. Sleek design in white with LCD readout. Takes 4 "AA" batteries (not included). 5½"x 3"x4". **\$27.98** (\$4.50) #A1916.



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